

By the Grace of the Gods



Roy
Illust. Ririnra

12



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In the security corp
headquarters, the duke's
staff take a short break
to discuss...parenting?!



“Clear
the road,
please!”

The boy's voice and the sound of rushing water drowned out the commotion. Ryoma sailed through the cleared street in his boat atop the torrent, arriving at the burning building.



“Are you
leaving the city,
like you said?
I heard you’re
leaving Serge’s
people in charge
of your
businesses.”

“What do
you want
to do,
Ryoma?”

Sticky slime

- ▶ Spider slime
- ▶ Crust slime
- ▶ Fiber slime
- ▶ Latex slime ▶ Rubber slime

Acid slime

- ▶ Pearl slime
- ▶ Shell slime

Poison Slime

- ▶ Medicine slime
- ▶ Stinging slime
- ▶ Filter slime

Scavenger slime

- ▶ Compost slime
- ▶ Fertile slime

Cleaner slime

- ▶ Deodorant slime

Weed slime

- ▶ Aquatic weed slime
- ▶ Algae slime
- ▶ Ash slime ▶ Smoke slime

Stone slime

- ▶ Sand slime

Iron slime

- ▶ Steel slime

Mud slime

- ▶ Sludge slime
- ▶ Soil slime

Aqua slime

- ▶ Sewage slime
- ▶ Ice slime

[Slime without evolutions discovered yet.]

- ★ Metal slime
- ★ Bloody slime
- ★ Fluff slime
- ★ Drunk slime
- ★ Snow slime

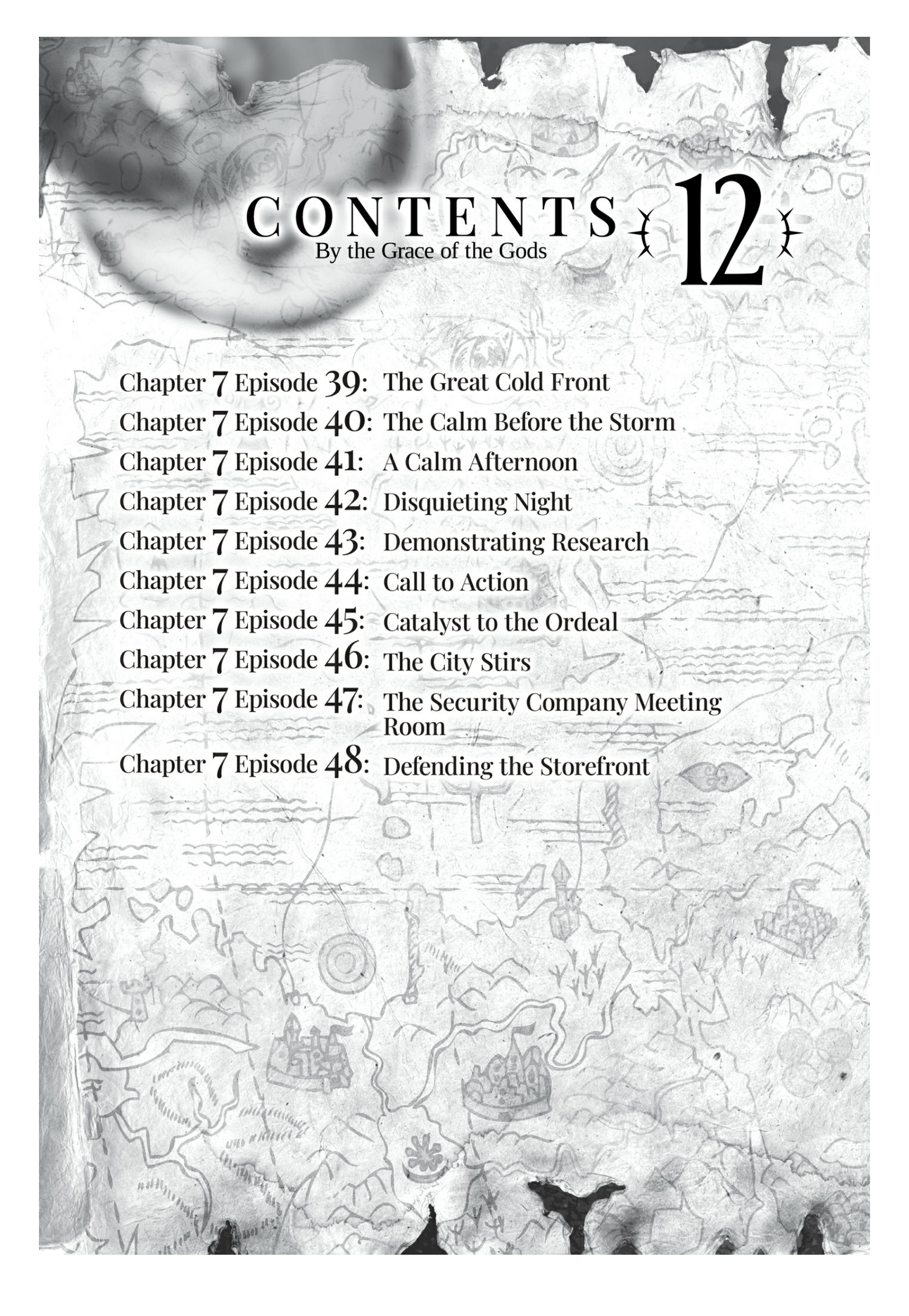
[Magical slime]

- ★ Earth slime
- ★ Wind slime
- ★ Water slime
- ★ Dark slime
- ★ Light slime
- ★ Healing slime



Ryoma's Slime Chart

*An arrow ▶ denotes a possible evolution. *All slimes listed branch from normal slime



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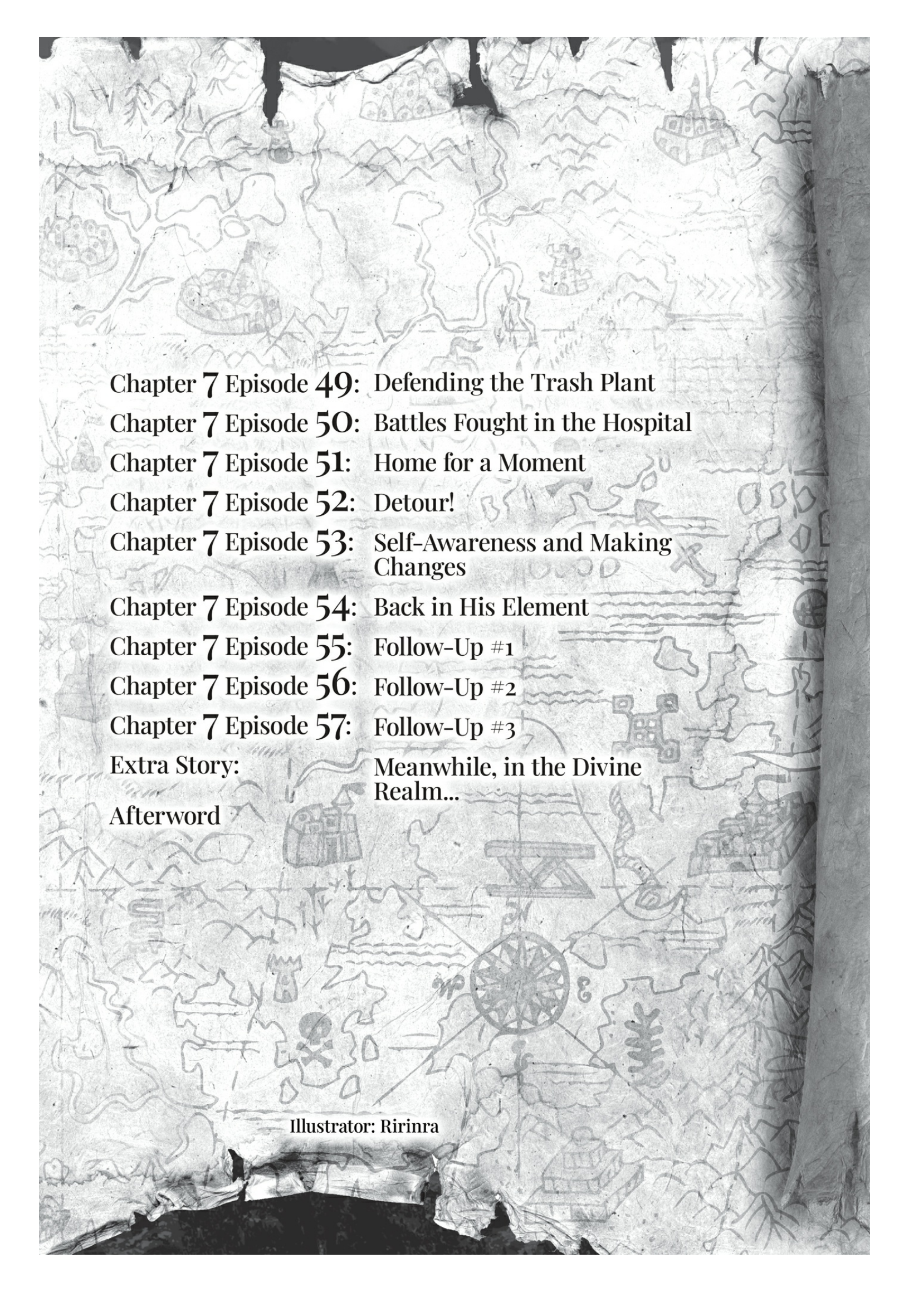
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Illustrator: Ririnra

Chapter 7, Episode 39: The Great Cold Front

“Brr... Another biting day.”

With less than a week left in the year, the city of Gimul and Duke Jamil’s territory at large had been hit with a historic cold front. The recent streak of heavy snowfall meant that I had to start my commute before daybreak. As I stamped across waist-high snow in my handcrafted snowshoes, I found myself thoroughly relieved that I could cast long-distance teleportation magic using stone slimes as targets.

Before long, the familiar Gimul city gate came into view. The pair of guards on either side of the gate gave me a wave.

“Good morning!” I called out.

“Morning!” one responded.

“It keeps getting colder, doesn’t it?” the other added.

The snow slowed my tread, so I arrived at the gate just as we finished greeting each other.

“It’s got to be a tough trek, what with the snow,” one of them added.

“Especially when it piles up day after day.”

“It doesn’t make it easier, for sure.”

I presented my ID, and they checked it during our brief small talk.

“You’re good to go. And you’re doing your *thing* again, right? We’ll help you get set up.”

“Thank you. That’d help me out a lot.”

“*You’re* the one helping *us*!”

“It’ll get our blood pumping, at least.”

I assumed they really did want to warm up with a bit of exercise. And two extra pairs of hands would help me out.

I began to produce the series of tools needed for the job from the Dimension Home. “With how cold it’s been, some of my aqua slimes evolved into ice slimes recently.”

“Aqua slimes are made of water, right? I’m no expert, but are you sure they didn’t just freeze?”

“I get that a lot, but it looks like they’re a different species.”

An experiment I’d performed earlier had proven that aqua slimes were resilient to temperature changes, for the most part, but that they either loved or hated freezing temperatures. Every aqua slime that preferred the cold had also shown an inclination for Ice magical energy. What was more, I’d kept all the aqua slimes in the same environment, but only the ones that had been drawn to the Ice element had changed into ice slimes. It didn’t seem like the aqua slimes had merely frozen over.

“Speaking of ice,” said one of the guards, “any chance we can get our hands on some more of those anti-slip things for shoes?”

“Oh? I consigned the sales of them to the Morgan Trading Company.”

“From what I’ve heard, word got out from us guards about this anti-slip...rubber, was it? Well, it really works. As soon as they’re restocked at Morgan’s, they sell out.”

The other guard chimed in, “Most of the injuries in town lately are caused by snow or ice. I’ve seen some adventurers using the equipment they’d use to climb mountains in the snow, but most people in the city don’t have anything like that.”

“Right...”

A specialized boost in demand. Winters of past years in this region had been more forgiving; this year’s cold front was unusually severe. No one in the city had prepared for snowfall like this, and no shop would carry a large stock of winter wear that wouldn’t sell under normal circumstances. Not many shops would, anyway.

On the other hand, I had learned of this cold front by chance before it hit, when I’d spoken to the gods. That had allowed me to pass the information

along to my departments throughout the city, and the Morgan Trading Company had been the quickest to react. Maybe he'd had his own intel that had tipped him off to the impending extreme weather, but either way, Serge had jumped into action as soon as I'd told him that a massive cold front might be incoming. What had followed was a rapid production cycle that had fully utilized the new factory and staff to develop, mass-produce, and sell various types of snow gear, like rubber non-slip soles that attached to the bottom of the shoe.

The boat the guards were now assembling was another example of those devices. I had designed the boat after the one I rode in Fatoma, adding a small grill to the back with a contraption that resembled a tall pot with a coil wrapped around it. In short, I had built a Pop Pop Boat that looked almost like a toy. After the skeleton of the boat was assembled, I placed one filter slime in each of the pair of metal pipes that extended out from the rear, along with an ash slime amid the charcoal in the grill. Then I lit it. Finally, I put an aqua slime in the pot and generated enough water by magic to fill the pipes.

"Can you put this up as well?" I asked the guards.

"Sure thing."

While they erected a yellow flag that read "Street Cleaning & Desnowing" in red font, I had one more task to do. The water in the pan was beginning to heat up, and I asked the aqua slime within if it was ready. It seemed eager and excited. I double-checked the streets beyond the gate to make sure there were no pedestrians as far as I could see.

"Here we go."

Now that the aqua slime had synchronized with the water around it, I gave it magic and asked it to move. The water in the pot immediately began to swirl around, until it shot out and formed a sphere above the street before me. The ball of hot water slowly descended onto the snow piled in the street. The sphere popped like a bubble, spreading out and melting the snow. The melted snow mixed with the original dose of hot water and aqua slime to increase its volume. With the additional water continuing to be moved by magic, it spread farther and consumed more snow piles.

Desnowing the streets through aqua slime magic had become a part of my morning routine. Back in Japan, I had heard that desnowing with water would only result in it freezing over again, turning the snow into a more dangerous sheet of ice. But that only happened if the water was left on the street. Physics on Earth had made it very difficult to recover the spilled water, but there was magic in this world. With the use of slime magic—and its meticulous control of the elements, enabled by a synchronized slime—I could collect every drop of the water from the street before it froze again!

While I was daydreaming up a pitch like that, the aqua slime had grown quite sizable, having accumulated all the moisture from the street. Now in a dome shape, the mass of water almost looked like one enormous slime. That was enough to start with.

“I’ll get going now,” I called to the guards huddled around the grill at the back of the boat as I jumped onto it.

Since the pair knew what was coming, they promptly moved out of the way, albeit with a longing glance at the warm fire. Just as they did, the giant ball of water settled under the boat. The aqua slime traveled through the pipe and the filter slime to reenter the pot, along with some water. The rest of the water remained on the street, upon which the boat now floated. I was all set.

“See you tomorrow!”

With a sendoff from the guards, the boat glided into the city. Using water slime magic for desnowing, street cleaning, and transportation all at the same time was one of my solutions to deal with the snowfall as efficiently as possible. People from the city clerk’s office or the Adventurers’ Guild could have performed this task in my stead, but this was my way of doing a little charity for the city, since everybody was short-staffed because of the weather. I always had a surplus of magical energy anyway, and using slime magic apparently pleased the gods.

Besides, it was kind of nice to cruise through the city in the early morning. While most people didn’t come out this early, I usually passed some people who were up before it was bright outside—either because of their job or the snow—and I got to know them a bit.

At first, some of them would look completely dumbstruck or freak out, thinking they were hallucinating. By now, though, they'd gotten used to it. Even if I didn't know their names, the people I saw every morning had begun to wave or call to me.

"Hey, little mage! Can you come over here for a second?!" The lady who ran a food stand called to me. She was one of the ones I'd become acquainted with.

Manipulating the water flow below it, I pulled my boat up to her. "Good morning. How can I help you?"

"Take this with you. On the house." She gave me a wooden bowl of warm soup, chock full of chopped sausage and vegetables, complete with a spoon.

"It's so warm. Thank you!"

"And don't forget this. I appreciate your hard work, kid." To go with those kind words, she gave me a firm piece of bread.

"Thank you again. I'll get back to it!" I took my boat back out onto the streets and returned to desnowing.

I took a spoonful of the soup, and the heat and flavor seeped into my mouth. When I swallowed, it warmed me from the inside out. More and more people now cheered me on or gave me gifts like this when I worked early in the morning.

Dawn was slowly breaking. I continued making my way through the still silver-coated streets of the city atop a cruising boat, enjoying my breakfast. While this work didn't make me a single sute, it more than made up for it in how much it fulfilled me. These cold mornings weren't so bad.

Chapter 7, Episode 40: The Calm Before the Storm

After my morning routine, I headed straight for work. When I joined Hudom in front of the laundry shop, though, I noticed that he looked a bit dead inside.

“Good morning,” I said. “Did something happen?”

“The same as always...and that’s the thing. I’m really astonished that I’m starting to think your magic is normal.”

Ah ha. Moving the boat on a concentrated sphere of water, not to mention maintaining the cleaning and snow-melting of the streets for over an hour, was difficult; the average spellcaster would’ve run out of magic, or else would’ve lacked the technique to do so at all. And Hudom had watched me do all this and thought almost nothing of it? He was fitting right in. There was no problem, then. I packed up the boat and started my work day.

Our first job would take place just down the road from the laundry shop. We would manually shovel snow in the residential area in the east part of town. Heavy snow blanketed the entire city, so there was no end to the streets that needed shoveling.

“It may be too late now, but shouldn’t you have brought the boat, if we’re clearing the snow anyway?” Hudom asked.

“Well, magic *would* be faster than shoveling by hand, but even that small boat can’t go down alleyways—and besides, not even my magic would last long enough to take the boat to every corner of the city. Downing a lot of magic recovery potions isn’t the best idea, so I try to limit that method to the early morning, when there are few pedestrians, and to streets that are wide enough but can’t get enough shovelers. There’s no need to overextend when adventurers, government workers, and even ordinary residents start shoveling the streets on their own as soon as the sun is up.”

“Makes sense. So you *do* run out of magic. Seeing how you didn’t even break a sweat operating that boat, I thought it was some magical item, or at least

packed with magic crystals. Or else, I thought you had *some* hidden supply of magic.”

“Please! I wouldn’t put that much effort into this.”

“Thought so. You didn’t look like you were trying to trick anybody. But still, it would make *more* sense if I knew that you were just chugging potions or some other trick...” Hudom looked conflicted.

Well, I didn’t say I’d pulled it off without any tricks.

It’s worth noting that shoveling snow was a task prone to accidents. Snow could fall off a roof to injure or trap the shoveler. On the flip side, shoveling snow off of a roof could lead to you falling and being buried in it. In addition to exercising caution and using proper gear, it was critical never to attempt snow shoveling alone.

Before I knew it, we had arrived at our destination.

“Let’s start around here,” I proposed.

“Aye, aye.”

Hudom and I began working in one of the residential streets that hadn’t yet been shoveled. First, Hudom opened the lids to the storm drains that lined the street.

“Same as yesterday, please,” I told the filter slimes I produced with space magic. They plugged the drains at either end. Then I brought out a jug and emptied it, pouring out the sewage and sludge slimes.

These slimes were once normal ordinary slimes with an affinity for poison magic before they evolved. The aqua slime evolved by feeding on sewage, and the mud slime on sludge. They both had the Release Stench skill, much like the scavenger slime. Otherwise, they were pretty much the same as the aqua and mud slimes respectively. Just as people had asked me if I was sure the ice slime wasn’t just a frozen aqua slime, these poor guys were destined to beg the question: weren’t they just aqua and mud slimes that had become dirty?

They were the product of—not to mention my greatest allies for—cleaning ditches. Since they fed on sewage and sludge, all I had to do was throw them

into the storm drains and they would feed (and clean) on their own. With the proper infrastructure, they could even contribute to a sewage system and help with large-scale water reclamation. On top of that...

“Chief? You okay?” Hudom asked.

“Oh, yes. I’m fine!”

My train of thought was getting lost in slime applications again. I had a job to do!

Setting my brainstorming aside, I got to placing what I called solar-powered water heaters on the storm drains. These were made by attaching absorption boards onto copper pipes as long as the storm drains’ width. The absorption boards heated up on contact with light; I’d created them by mixing sticky slime hardening solution with the black powder I had once presented the gods with. These melted the snow we’d shovel into the storm drains, and they raised the water temperature high enough to melt even more snow, turning the drains into snow-melting tanks and drastically improving the efficiency of the snow clearance.

The thing was, these absorption boards were super simple. The board heated up when exposed to light, which then heated the water through the copper pipes. Personally, I thought there was still much room for improvement. Even if I couldn’t make them as elaborate as the proper solar-powered water heaters in the streets of Japan, I could get pretty creative with them.

However, I’d deliberated with Glisella at the Merchants’ Guild, and we had noted the following. The boards generated enough heat to start using them as is, especially when combined with light magic. Many non-mage workers, especially adventurers, at least knew the Light spell—the most elementary form of light magic—to use in lieu of torchlight. The simple structure of the bronze pipe allowed for the craftsmen in town to create them, which meant that they could be mass-produced. We’d formulated a plan to produce and place these contraptions all over town to make the snow shoveling more efficient.

We decided to hold off on improving upon the device, and the merchant’s guild requested mass production of the bronze pipes through the city’s builders. I would make as many heating boards as I could and lend them to the guild.

Once the two parts were put together to make water heaters, the merchant's guild would manage and train the snow shovelers to use them. I had only lent them the heating boards because it was an experimental contraption, no matter how much demand there was in the city. In the future (well, when I got Reinhart's approval), I was thinking of using the properly engineered water heaters to build a public bath or something. The heating boards could already become hotter than a car's hood in midsummer. After I'd made improvements to the water heater itself, a public bath didn't seem like an impossible venture, especially if I could use an industrial stove in conjunction. I'd have to do some experiments and run some estimates to see if it was a viable business or not, but...

"There!"

Once we'd set up the water heaters, the rest was simple: manual snow-shoveling. We just had to scoop up snow in a shovel—the tip of which was fashioned from a hardening solution board—to move it from the street into the storm drains. Then the water, water heater, and slimes in the drains would take care of it. Any excess water passed through the filter slimes and down the rest of the drains. Made it easier to work with no chance of water back flowing onto the street.

Just then, an older lady stepped out of her house. "Oh, good morning!"

"Good morning, Miss," Hudom replied as I continued to work.

"You've already shoveled in front of the house. You're too sweet... I'll get some of that snow off of my roof."

"Don't tell me you're gonna climb up onto your roof," Hudom said. "That's too dangerous. I'll take care of it."

"Oh, no, sweetie. You've already shoveled the street. Besides, my legs haven't failed me yet," the woman said.

"It's no trouble. Chief!" Hudom called.

"It's really no trouble," I said. "We've been keeping to the streets only because we didn't want to trespass. If it's all right with you, ma'am, we'd be happy to clear your roof as well. We have the tools for it."

I'd once had a terrible experience with heavy snowfall in Japan. After that, I had spent some time researching any and all gear and methods to deal with snow. Now, I tried to recreate as many of those as I could remember. A tool I'd found particularly nifty was a sheet of metal, covered with waterproof fabric and attached to a pole. It was useful for cutting out a chunk of snow on the roof, which would slide right off and onto the ground.

"Besides, we're in a state of emergency," Hudom chimed in. "As long as you don't mind signing a note, we'll get paid from the guild when we report shoveling your roof. A fund's been allocated for this, so it won't cost you anything."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. So let us take care of that for you," Hudom reassured her.



“Then...I think I’ll take you up on that,” the woman said.

As we were prepping to shovel her roof, Hudom whispered to me, “She doesn’t like being treated like an *old person*, I think. Let’s keep that in mind.”

I wondered if that was why Hudom had mentioned the government fund—because he’d picked that up about the woman. He had brought it up without much of a segue, but she hadn’t seemed offended. Once, on a previous snow-shoveling day, one of the townspeople had demanded we cater to his every whim. Hudom had breezily dealt with him too. Hudom was often generous and kind, with a laid-back attitude. He had a keen eye for the feelings of others, and he knew how best to address them. The more time I spent with him, the more that became apparent.

“Speaking of, Chief, did something happen recently?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just got this feeling that...you’re starting to be on edge, like you were before.”

He really was perceptive. I didn’t think I’d let it show in my speech or demeanor.

“Just a feeling,” I clarified, “and I don’t plan going down the path I went down before. But I just...have a bad feeling.”

“I see. I thought things have been rather peaceful lately. Hadn’t noticed any prying looks. And with snowfall like this, I figured it would be sabotaging any plans they might have been cooking.”

“You may be right. But...if I was in their shoes, I think I’d make a move as soon as I was ready.” I tried my best to describe the feeling I couldn’t shake. “Um, it *has* been very peaceful lately. That’s exactly what’s bothering me. It feels like the quiet before a storm. Besides, we think they want to sabotage the duke. A personal grudge or something. Despite that, they aren’t going after the duke or his family directly—they’re working to hurt his reputation by unsettling the city. Of course, it *could* mean that they aren’t willing to risk a direct attack on the duke, because they don’t want the full force of the law after them. But what’s bothering me the most is that the orchestrator of this scheme, at least, doesn’t

mind worsening the state of the city. I can't help thinking they won't hesitate to hurt innocent people to achieve their goal."

"Yeah," Hudom agreed. "It's more than a nuisance to the residents. It was even more tense when I first came here. Heard about a lot of burglaries. Whoever it is, they definitely aren't bothered by collateral damage."

"Yes. Would someone like that just give up? I doubt it. Besides, they are not kept in check in Gimul, and Duke Reinhart has been furthering his pursuit in the capital. Not only is the enemy's scheme failing, they are on the brink of being apprehended, for all they know. Talk about a cornered beast... I think it's likely, *very* likely, that they are going to make a move, and they have no regard for protecting themselves anymore." I only became more sure of this the more I put myself in their shoes. "The snow might have been an unexpected hindrance for them, but we're caught up in dealing with it too. Knowing they can't evade the duke for long, they may resort to a final gambit. I have no proof of any of this, though."

Still, Hudom seemed convinced. "Very possible that they would strike if we gave them the chance. Okay. I'll keep my guard up."

"Thank you. It's better safe than sorry, so I want to make sure we're prepared. We've been requesting that each facility in the city review their emergency situation manuals. I think we're doing all we can do for now. Like you said, things are relatively peaceful at the moment. We should at least enjoy it while it lasts. I'm afraid I may revert to how I was before without some kind of mental break."

That was a massive cringe moment for me. I did not want to go down that road again. I was appreciative of Hudom for taking my hunch seriously when I couldn't back it up with any tangible evidence. Thanks to him and my other confidants, I was able to remain as calm as I was, and not get into the state of mind that had led to my outburst.

Chapter 7, Episode 41: A Calm Afternoon

Once morning had turned to afternoon and we had finished the day's shoveling, Hudom and I found ourselves at the church.

"Hello," I said as we walked in.

Bell, one of the sisters in charge of Gimul's church, greeted us. "Welcome, Takebayashi, Hudom. Thank you for providing space, and all that food..."

"Please, you're doing important work. Besides, the produce is all surplus from my experimental farm," I explained.

Behind her, the children from the orphanage, which was attached to the church, were maneuvering bags upon bags of cookware, potatoes, and beans, using wagons and wheelbarrows of all sizes.

Our job for the afternoon was to help the church operate their soup kitchen, which would double as our lunch. From what I had been told, the soup kitchen had been set up on church grounds until this point. However, the influx of laborers had drastically increased the number of people lining up at the soup kitchen, to the point where the overflow had become a cause of strife in the neighborhood. When I heard this, I offered to provide a place to run the soup kitchen, help move the food and equipment to the new location, and help cook the actual meals.

I turned back to Bell. "I would love to get started, but..."

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

"I had planned to transport everything with space magic...but when I was discussing my plan to do so at the security headquarters so we could adjust our schedule, I had some volunteers who wanted to help."

"I think that's them coming now, chief," Hudom said.

I followed his gaze. "Yes, that's them." Even from afar, I could see them. A two-line formation of well-built men, all a head or two taller than the others on

the street, were headed towards us in a rhythmical jog.

“You can definitely pick them out of a crowd,” said Hudom.

“You can say that again...”

“Those are the volunteers?” Bell asked, sounding a bit taken aback at the hulking frames of the men en route.

I tried to console her. “They may look intimidating, but you’ll find them friendly.”

“Even I can feel overwhelmed by them sometimes... I can’t fault any lady for feeling that way.”

By the time Hudom had said so, the team had arrived at the church.

“Thirty-eight Brawny Boys, reporting for duty!” one of them announced.

“Thank you.” I turned to Bell. “These are the volunteers. We call them the Brawny Boys at security. As you can see, they’re all very muscular. They’ll take care of you.”

“Yes, that’s plain to see...” Bell said.

At this, the brawn at the front of the pack puffed out his chest and said, “Thank you. If it’s lifting, you can leave it to us.” He made a show of flexing his biceps, and the rest of the squad struck poses behind him.

“Well, if you don’t mind jumping right in,” I said, “can you carry all this stuff to the new venue? And if you could help with everything we haven’t brought out yet too—over there.”

“We’re on it!” they answered.

“All right, boys! Split up and get to work!” their leader called, and the Brawny Boys got right to work.

The children were shocked at first by their size, but soon realized from their uniforms and my presence that they were there to help. They began to show the men where to go.

“I’m sorry if that shocked you,” I said.

“Oh, no. It was rude of *me*, when they came out here to help... I notice the

children recognize a few of them,” said Bell.

“Yes. They’re rather notorious...”

“Do you not get out much, Bell?” Hudom asked.

She nodded. “That’s fair to say. My days are usually spent managing the church. Even when I need to buy food or supplies, the older kids take turns going out for me.”

“It’s no wonder you don’t know them, then. They usually patrol the city, don’t they, chief?”

“That’s right,” I answered. “Like you were saying, they *look* strong and intimidating. I have them on patrol duty most of the time, as a deterrent for crime.” While someone’s stature didn’t correlate entirely to their strength in combat, muscle mass was a considerable factor. Besides, their looks alone provided a sense of security; these men had found their calling in crime deterrence. That being said... “Their team wasn’t formed with that in mind.”

“Oh? I would have thought so, from what you’ve told me,” Bell said.

“Well...it was *supposed* to be just a group of people who wanted to bulk up.” The Brawny Boys were participating in trial uses of the protein powder I was developing with Tint, one of the residents at the hospital. That was how they’d met, but they had actually been assigned to different teams at the security company. In fact, some of them worked at the trash processing plant. I had concocted the official title of the Bodybuilders’ Club for the group, but both the public and the members themselves preferred the Brawny Boys. The thirty-eight members who’d shown up today were only a portion of the Brawny Boys. Truth be told, I didn’t know how many there were now, because they accepted new recruits on a daily basis.

There were a few reasons for their popular demand. First, the supplement we created exceeded expectations, showing more drastic results in a shorter time frame than we’d expected, especially in ape or bull beastkin men, who’d had a very muscular build to begin with. Second, it’s common for beastkin to find muscular frames attractive—or they’re at least looking for a mate who does. Some members had even attributed new relationships to the protein supplements. Finally, with proper nutrition intake and physical care in addition

to taking the supplement, many subjects reported that they felt less tired or sore after exercise. Word of this spread, and nowadays people often asked to join the trial to attain those practical benefits. The trials had always involved physical exercise, but the Brawny Boys had turned into a sort of workout gym where members pursued looks, health, and even romantic connections. There was even a gallery of housewives watching the proceedings. I had put some serious thought into just building them their own gym at this point.

“All cargo has been brought out!” reported Captain Brawny, the one who’d led the troupe here.

With the last of our supplies and the children in tow, we made for the venue where we’d host today’s soup kitchen.

When we were right down the street from it, Bell noted, “This area’s been cleaned up quite a bit.”

“You’ve been here before?” I asked.

“Not often, but occasionally, when I need to run an errand for the church.”

“I see.”

We were walking down what looked like an average residential street in what had once been the slums. Bell seemed to notice the newly built houses and newly paved roads: fruits of the zone improvement, a joint project between us and the government.

When I explained as much, she asked a little nervously, “Forgive me for my ignorance. What do you mean by ‘zone improvement’? What happened to the people who used to live in this neighborhood?”

“Don’t worry, we didn’t force them out. A local leader by the name of Libile helped relocate them into one of three different living arrangements—with the residents’ approval, of course.”

Those who didn’t have a proper home in the slums, those living on the street or squatting in abandoned structures, were moved to a group home that the government had asked me to build. Out of those who’d owned a home in the neighborhood, those who were willing to relocate moved to the newly developed areas—this was similar to the process of urban land pooling on

Earth. For those who'd adamantly refused relocation, I had merely demolished and rebuilt their homes on the same plot. There was the occasional conflict or disagreement, but Liblé's mediation and governmental aid had smoothed things out. For many who'd been unenthusiastic about moving at first, it had been for a specific reason—for example, a leg injury that had prevented them from walking up or downhill—so we had been able to make note of their needs and cross reference the zoning plans to move them to an appropriate location. The clerk's office had even opened a department dedicated to this aspect of the process; many residents had come forward to say that their new homes were in more convenient locations than their old ones.

"That sounds wonderful," said Bell. "Does that mean that you'll soon be building a house on the land we're using today?"

I was taking us to one of the empty lots that had come as a result of the rezoning, but...

"Maybe down the road," I replied. "We can't feasibly turn every open plot of land into a comfortable residential area, and there are other construction projects that have higher priority. So we have a few empty lots on our hands that we haven't decided what to do with. We'll be going to one of them today, and you can run the soup kitchen there for the foreseeable future."

Before rezoning, I'd bought each resident's old land and the land they would move into, and afterwards I'd sold the land back to the new residents to make things easier. That meant I technically owned the empty plots, so I didn't have to seek anyone else's permission to host the church's soup kitchen.

Our conversation made the walk fly by. When we arrived at the plot, the Brawny Boys had already started setting up, and the kitchen was ready to fire up. We went straight to cooking.

"Where should we start, Bell?" I asked.

"We'll be making a lot of bean and potato soup today. Nothing too complicated. We need to wash the potatoes first before peeling and dicing them. Then we'll boil them with the beans, add thin slices of cured meat...then simmer and season."

"I'll get those potatoes washed." Hudom grabbed a few sacks of potatoes and

headed to the water station. An orphan girl ran over to help, but Hudom gently declined, stating that the cold water would be rough on the girl's hands. Very gentlemanly of him, but I couldn't help but notice a piercing look from a boy standing by a wagon nearby. Both the orphan girl and boy were only a year or two older than me.

The troubles of adolescence... I decided against interfering and turned to Bell. "By the way, I made the things I told you about. Would you like to see them?"

"The convenient tools you were talking about?"

"Yes. Here they are." From the Item Box I produced something most people on Earth would have recognized: a set of food slicers. Personally, I'd always considered them a staple of late-night shopping channels. I'd used the hardening solution board (like I had for everything else) for the handle and attached a metal blade to it.

I reached for one of the cured meats we were supposed to thinly slice and demonstrated the gadget.

"So that's how you use it," Bell noted.

"You can do more than just slice, though. By simply swapping out the blade compartment, you can julienne. Just glide it over like this, and it'll cut everything from meat to vegetables. You do need to be careful not to cut yourself, but it's safer for children than using a kitchen knife. But wait—there's more! I have another one like this, but with blades at the end of a cylinder. Just throw a peeled potato into the cylinder and pull the lever, and...voila! The whole potato is chopped in one motion. Children can use this too." My shopping channel spiel was met with no reaction from Bell, as she was deep in thought, but the orphans who had been watching the demonstration, particularly those who were about my age or younger, went nuts.

"Wow! We can use that to help cook too?!"

"Miss Bell! I want to help you cook!"

"Well... I had thought it too early to let you use knives, but this may be safe enough." Bell looked at me. "But they could still cut themselves, right?"

"I won't deny that. But any tool has some sort of risk, if used incorrectly."

“That’s true,” she admitted. “All right, everyone. Be very careful when you use these tools.” As soon as she gave the green light, the kids cheered in excitement. Bell added to me, “Thank you for keeping the young ones in mind.”

“I just happened to know of something they could use.”

From what I had been told beforehand, I knew that the orphans were supposed to attend the charitable works of the church as much as possible. However, there were plenty of things that the younger kids couldn’t take part in: using knives and fire, for example. There were other tasks, like carrying ingredients from here to there or fetching water, but there was only so much weight the young ones could carry. As a result, the younger orphans usually ended up waiting around during the cooking portion of the soup kitchen. When I’d been told as much, I’d thought of the food slicer. So I’d discussed and prototyped it, then built the ones I’d brought in today for their debut in the field. I had told Bell about some of them, but now they were all approved by her to be used by the children.

Happily wielding the food slicers, the children began prepping the food as told. After seeing those smiles, I felt like the time I spent making the food slicers was well worth it.

I should get to work too. I joined Hudom at the potato wash. There were plenty of things to worry about, and precisely because of those things, I vowed to relish these calm afternoons.

Chapter 7, Episode 42: Disquieting Night

By evening, the soup kitchen was beginning to wrap up. I hadn't kept track of how many we'd served, but it must have been upwards of several hundred. We'd just repeated the process—cooking and serving, cooking and serving—until we'd finally run out of food.

A few scuffles had broken out in the line, but those had been quelled quickly with the assistance of the Brawny Boys. They'd also helped us clean up and volunteered to take Bell and the kids back to the orphanage. Hudom and I just needed to get home. I had been asking Hudom to escort me to the north gate, since my home was a quick space magic spell away from there.

"Hudom, can we stop somewhere on our way?"

"Sure thing," he said. It was settled.

Walking down the street, painted golden by the sunset, we'd begun to approach one of the new zones of the city. The new residents' children were running around in the cold, open air.

"Good evening!" I greeted them.

"Hi, Ryoma!"

"Slime boy!"

"Here comes the secret boss!"

Secret boss? Was he implying that there was a non-secret boss around? While I contemplated this question, the kids waved their goodbyes and ran off, still full of energy.

"It's still bustling around here," Hudom said.

"There are a lot of people on the night shift in this area."

Accordingly, some beastkin had traits of nocturnal animals. It depended on the person as to whether they were completely nocturnal or could choose to stay up during the day, if they wanted to.

“A lot of mole beastkin here, right?” Hudom asked.

“Right. I think half of the residents here are mole beastkin.”

As the name suggested, they had some mole characteristics. It wasn't like they couldn't be out under sunlight at all, but they preferred dark environments to bright ones. Their true talent, though, was displayed underground. Their smaller stature allowed them to maneuver better in tunnels, and they were heavy lifters too. But their most useful characteristic was a special sixth sense they were born with that allowed them to know how likely an underground tunnel was to collapse or become dangerous. Those with heightened senses could not only feel a collapse before it happened, but also sense the presence of water pockets or poisonous gas.

“Cities closer to mines tend to have more mole beastkin in them,” Hudom pointed out.

“I'm sure they make wonderful miners.”

Since mole beastkin liked living underground, I had built their homes with basements. Their main living quarters were there, and they usually used the above-ground portions of their houses for storage or to rent out.

We made it through the nocturnal district and finally came to our destination in the north-northeast section of town: the shelter, or the group home for the formerly homeless residents of the slums. It was a row of four square buildings built with sand slimes and sand magic. I had taken inspiration from government housing in Japan, but these buildings didn't look too clean. The place had the feeling of a neglected boarding house. An acquaintance of mine in college had lived in a place like this. There was a pair of men huddled at a bonfire in an open area.

“Good evening,” I called to them.

“You again, rich boy?”

“We told you this ain't a good place for someone like you.”

While their language might have given off the impression that I wasn't welcome, that wasn't the case. They knew that I was the one who had built the shelter and that I was pretty close to Lible. Besides, I always made a point to

bring a certain little gift every time I came, which helped me get a warmer welcome.

“I brought the usual,” I said. “Could we talk for a bit?”

“Talking’s free,” one of them said.

The other turned to the building. “Hey! The usual kid and his booze is here!”

Beckoned by that call, a crowd of people with cups and bowls emerged from the building. The sight of them shuffling out in layers of wrinkled and dirtied clothes secretly reminded me of a zombie film. In the meantime, I produced a few things with space magic: three large barrels of wine I’d gotten a good deal on the other day, three large barrels of a drinkable batch of white liquor that the goblins had mass-produced, and piles of lamon fruit and giger roots. I also brought out a box of tools and metal slimes. Leaving the white liquor alone, the metal slimes and I rapidly sliced the giger and threw it into the wine barrels.

“Heat.”

Stirring the wine with a stick I had brought out, I brought the drinks close to a boil with fire magic. I had only used the bare-bones ingredients in a messy process, but now I had hot liquor and wine that was pretty darn enjoyable.

I called out to the crowd, “Come on, line up. I have lamon slices to go with the hot wine, if you want one.”

“I’ll take the wine, chief,” Hudom said.

“All right, form two lines!” one of the men said.

“One drink at a time!”

By the time we were ready, there were already lines formed by those who knew the drill. We started serving the drinks.

“We always appreciate it.”

“Ahh... That puts hair on your chest.”

“Heh heh heh... Can’t beat this on a cold day.”

We continued serving the drinks until the man I had come here for came out.

“Can I trouble you for a cup too, sir?” The man wore a filthy wrap, and his hair

was disheveled. While his face might have been handsome, he was completely unhygienic. He always called me “sir” and spoke in a weaselly manner.

“It hasn’t been too long since I last saw you. How have you been?” I asked.

“Really good, thanks to you. Can’t thank you enough.”

“Any problems you’re having lately?”

By this point, he had gotten his drink and come around to my side of the barrel to get out of the way of the line.

“Not much around here. Peaceful. You got us shelter, and even the folks that never really settled down ain’t complaining about a place to get out of the cold. Well, with this many people you always got a few scuffles, but Libble’s been working with us on that.”

“Good. I’m glad there’s no major issues.”

“Yeah. Thanks to you, sir.” The man took a sip of liquor and exhaled, his breath fogging in the air. He waited until the fog disappeared before adding, “Well, I got one piece of news. Just not from around here.”

“Oh? What happened?” I asked.

“The bar I told you about before. It’s been closed for a while, but it’s been turning out lots of bottles and food trash. There’s even more now—they’re leaving out trash every day, when it used to be every couple of days. Folks who get their meals from the trash were happy about it. Seeing that the bar’s taking shipments often, it looks like they might open up soon.”

“Really? I would love to stop by if they do.”

“So would I. And that’s about it around here. I’d just be talking about the snow otherwise.”

“That’s understandable, with how much snow we’ve had. Oh, speaking of...” At this point we had run out of liquor, so I let the crowd know and put the barrels away. At the same time, I produced a package via space magic. “It’s just leftovers from lunch, but if you want it... It’s *hard*, so be careful.”

“Thanks, sir. Us mice beastkin love anything with a crunch. I like your style. See you later.” He took the package, finished his drink, and sauntered off.

After a short time, we also ran out of wine, so the crowd dispersed. Now that I'd finished my detour, we headed for the North gate.

En route to the gate, Hudom asked, "Do you always hand out booze there, chief?"

"You're asking me now?" He had helped me without saying anything, so I thought he knew.

"Well, I had *heard* that you did."

"Oh, when you were investigating me," I said. "I've done it quite a few times. And I have a couple of reasons for it. One of them is just to get the alcohol off of my hands." My goblins were very passionate about this. Ever since they had developed a taste for alcohol, they'd started distilling it every day, as long as they had ingredients. Fatoma's white liquor was easy for them to make and didn't take long to mature, which left me with barrels of the stuff constantly. I had the drink slimes help consume them, even though I still had a good amount of the wine I had stockpiled for that purpose. "I didn't want to just dump the stuff, especially since the goblins worked hard for it, so the barrels kept piling up."

"Like a parent who keeps every drawing their kid has ever made."

"I don't know if that's an accurate comparison, but that was one of the reasons. And do you remember the man I spoke to last?"

"I am technically your bodyguard," Hudom said. "I stayed out of it because it was clear you knew each other. He's on the job, isn't he?"

"Yes. He's a *tipster*. When I started a bunch of these projects, he was introduced to me by Libe. He said since he'd be busy, the man you saw today would know about almost everything that goes on in the city. He evidently has friends all over Gimul. His standard price is a drink and a meal. Depending on the type of information I ask for, I pay extra."

"So you hand out the booze to everyone as a cover?"

"Partially. It's also that the former residents of the slums help get me that information indirectly. They work all over the city by picking up trash, for example. They all gather information, which passes to my informant. Then he

passes the most relevant tips to me. In that sense, they are all informants, whether they know it or not. I wanted to thank them somehow.”

Hudom seemed to understand my sentiment. “Any new tips today?”

“Yes. Like we were talking about this morning, our enemy may be on the move.”

“You keep that close an eye on them?”

“It’s not perfect, but they were suspects from the beginning. Even when our objective is to maintain the status quo, there’s no reason not to keep an eye on them.”

“I think the term is *entrapment*... You’d make a much better investigator than I do, chief.”

“I’m pretty good at managerial work, but you’re much better at communicating with people. We’ve been working together lately, and I’ve seen you make friends with everybody.”

“You think so? I’m just being myself, really. It’s much easier than talking to nobles... Actually, there’s plenty of nobles who are much better at reading people and manipulating conversations than I am. It’s a prerequisite for them.”

“Ugh...” I was feeling sick just imagining having to hold a conversation in the midst of nobles. I wondered if Elia was doing all right. In fact, the duke and duchess could be attending balls and functions as we spoke. I couldn’t help but wish them luck.

The conversation was getting grimmer, so I changed the subject. “You were noble-born, weren’t you, Hudom? Do you know much about what goes on in high society? I’m oblivious to it.”

“I practically ran away, so not much about the past few years. I could tell you about things that happened up to my student years... And it depends on the topic.”

“The topic...” I contemplated. “Anything would be news to me, and I’m curious. Well, can you think of any house that might hold a grudge against Duke Jamil regarding a fire?”

Hudom hesitated for a beat. “Why do you want to know?”

“Carrying on from our conversation this morning, I was wondering why the enemy chose arson as their first method of sabotaging the city. I couldn’t shake it. It is possible that they didn’t care how they caused a commotion in the city, and there’s no guarantee the arson has anything to do with their identity, but...anyone come to mind?”

“I don’t know about a grudge, but one house that both has connections with the duke and is associated with fire would be the former Margrave Volcano.”

I’d never heard of that name. “By *former*, you mean...”

“Long story, but it was revoked, which makes him an earl. It had to do with Duke Jamil. Like I said, it’s a long story, but...”

We walked to the North gate as Hudom told me about Volcano. It made the wind bite colder and the night seem a little lonelier...

Chapter 7, Episode 43: Demonstrating Research

In the morning, two days later—only five days until the new year—I was working at the hospital.

“Master Ryoma, it’s almost time,” Libiola, the maid, notified me.

I had booked a meeting room in the security HQ to discuss the preserved foods I’d been developing with Serge and the others over lunch. I packed up my work quickly and greeted Doctor Maflal on my way out of the hospital.

By the time I made it to the meeting room, the maids had already set up everything for me, so I only needed to do a once-over before our guests arrived.

Serge, as well as Piolo and Clana Sionji, arrived punctually for our meeting.

“Thank you for taking the time,” I greeted them.

“Thank you for inviting us,” Serge answered.

“I’ve been looking forward to it,” Piolo said.

“Long time no see, Ryoma,” Clana added.

“It’s great to see you, Clana. Please, take a seat.” I commenced our lunch meeting. “To start off our meeting, please choose what you would like for lunch. I don’t have much variety yet, but there’s plenty of each of them.”

We had set three wooden boxes atop the meeting room table. They were packed with reflective bags, each labeled with its contents and date of manufacture.

“Oh! This bag is made from your water-resistant fabric, although it has a slightly different texture,” Serge noted. “And there’s liquid in it, which makes sense...but I assume it’s not a bag of anything pickled.”

“The bag isn’t the only thing new,” Piolo said. “This one was packed two months ago.”

“This one’s from three months ago,” Clana added.



They continued discussing the packs on the table. I had prepared a selection of instant lunches today. As Serge had pointed out, I had tweaked the water-resistant coating to something closer to the hardening solution. By inserting aluminum foil, I'd created a new watertight pouch that kept the heat and light out. I'd then packed the bags with food, pinched the air out, and sealed them, before disinfecting them with the heat from the pressure cooker I had custom ordered from the Degnome workshop. Although the materials I had used were a little different from instant lunches on Earth, the process was identical. The difficult part was maintaining the high heat and pressure with magic during the cooking process.

Before I'd gone to Fatoma, I'd kept trying and failing to make these, but finally, with the help of the pressure cooker, they'd become a reality. Before, I'd tried casting a barrier spell on a pot to keep the pressure building; unfortunately, that had made it difficult for me to relieve enough pressure to prevent the pot (and its contents) from exploding all over the place. Otherwise, I couldn't put enough heat on the food to properly disinfect it. Eventually, I got used to barrier magic enough that I could feel my barriers getting stronger. But even then, I could only make a successful instant lunch once in a while, almost by dumb luck. At some point, my focus might have shifted from creating a successful pack to just boosting the strength of my barrier magic.

Once I'd started using the pressure cooker, though, high-heat, high-pressure cooking had never been easier. I was now able to make a steady supply of instant lunches with proper sanitization and completely sealed packs. Degnome had my full respect and gratitude for this incredible creation.

These instant lunches had turned out even better than I had hoped. I hadn't figured out how to mass-produce them, but that wasn't a bridge I had to cross yet.

"I double-checked that they are all safe to eat with the Appraisal spell," I said. "Not to mention we have a hospital in this building, if anything were to happen."

Piolo chuckled. "Well, that's not reassuring." Still, he reached for the oldest

pouch on the table. I assumed he was curious to see if I'd managed to preserve the taste, since his company handled foods as well. His wife Clana reached for another of the oldest pouches, but of a different instant lunch.

"I will heat those up here." Lulunese collected the pouches and began heating them in a pot of water on the stovetop magical item on the table.

"While those are warming up, I wanted to show you something else..."

Just as I said so, Lilian brought out a carafe of hot water while Libiola set clear cups made out of hardening solution on the table. The maids were so perfectly coordinated that I really didn't have to do anything.

"Let's have a cup of tea," I said.

Serge inspected his cup. "This is the same material as the ones you brought to the wedding. Even without the coloring, they look... Well, I suppose you're showing us what's *in* the cup today."

"It's in a cup, and there's the carafe. He wants us to pour hot water in it," Piolo said.

"Up to the line marked inside the cup," I said.

"Allow me." Clana elegantly poured hot water from the carafe into each of their cups. Instantly, a coffee-like aroma filled the room.

"That smells wonderful. Similar to kafee, but distinct," said Serge.

"Roasted dante root tea. It's considered medicinal in some regions," Piolo added.

"That's absolutely right. I'm impressed you could tell from the scent alone. I was hoping to make one with black tea, but I wasn't quite happy with the flavor, so I went ahead with dante tea," I explained.

Truth be told, I was far from the sort of distinguished gentleman who could tell coffee from dante tea by smell. I hadn't had any coffee since coming to this world, and if someone had told me that the smell of dante tea was just the smell of coffee from a different region, I'd have been none the wiser. Maybe you'd have to have a sophisticated palette to run a major trading company like they do.

Also, judging by Serge's comment, there was such a thing as "kafee" in this world. As I was considering asking Piolo to order some for me in the future, I saw that my guests were already trying what I decided to call the dante coffee.

"It doesn't taste half bad," Serge said.

"Yeah," Piolo agreed. "And it's not just powdered dante root either."

I had used magic to freeze dry the dante before pulverizing it. I thought we could market this in a few different ways, but I wasn't sure if we could turn a profit with it.

"If we could sell this, it would be a bonus," I said. "But I'm more interested in showcasing its manufacturing process. I used it to create medicine and process food products like this, but I can use this to create other dishes as well. This allows me to preserve food for a long time with little effect on flavor. On top of that, they're ready to enjoy with just a little bit of water."

"My interest is definitely piqued," Serge said.

"The process dehydrates without adding any heat, so it should be useful in a variety of ways. Soup, rice, noodles, boiled beans... You could even use it to dry herbs and fruit. It's not a perfect method, though. I processed the dante here using my magic, but we would have to custom order magical items that can reproduce this effect and continuously spend magic stones to recreate it. It does cost a lot of magical energy, so our manufacturing cost would be high. These would be more of a luxury item."

Freeze-drying apparently required ice magic stones. Even the smallest of them were very expensive, since they were used for food preservation and air conditioning. They were an essential supply for nobles and high-end restaurants, especially in the summer. While not as many were used in the winter, magic stones could be stockpiled for a long time, so their price hardly dropped, even in the dead of winter. A stone without any element *could* power an ice magical item, but at a reduced efficiency compared to magical power. I'd be lucky if I only spent triple the amount of magic stones compared to using ice magic stones.

I'd read one time that instant tea on Earth was mostly made by a process called spray drying...but recreating that with magical items would have been

more complicated, expensive, and mana-stone intensive, according to Degnome, who had given me an estimate on the magical items we'd need for these processes.

"Could sell it to the rich and the nobles, as long as it's high quality. A lot of them travel with a chef and fresh ingredients, but not all of them can afford that. Still, if we're going to sell it to the common market, we won't turn a profit unless we can make a good amount of it decently cheap. That's the direction you're thinking of going in, right? And you think the food's got a better chance at fitting that bill than the tea," Piolo said.

"That's right," I replied.

"You're really teasing us with all this flashy new stuff, huh?" Piolo said.

Clana gently laughed. "If these instant foods have a serious prospect for mass production, we'd have to judge them harshly."

I returned a nervous chuckle. While I had confidence in the instant lunches, there was something a little scary about how she laughed...

"I would prefer that, actually," I said. "They're still prototypes, and I'm sure there are some points of improvement."

At this point, the instant lunches seemed properly heated. The three maids passed bowls and bagged lunches to each guest plus me at the table.

"The pouches are very hot," one of the maids warned.

I took the lead by slicing open my pouch with a knife before pouring the contents into the bowl. The pouch's hardening solution coating made it difficult to tear by hand. My three guests followed suit, investigating the look and smell of the dish they chose.

Serge was visibly excited. "Wow... Were these really prepared *months* ago? Not only do they look unspoiled, they smell wonderful. I would believe you if you told me these were prepared this morning."

The Sionjis, whose business handled more food than Serge's, reserved any commentary for the moment, reaching for their spoons. They each took a bite of their dish and spent several seconds chewing and tasting it.

“It’s good,” Piolo said. “It tastes freshly cooked.”

“Yes. Nothing like cured meat or vegetables,” Clana chimed in.

“Let me see...” Serge reached for his own dish. “Ooh! I had plenty of preserved food back when I was a traveling merchant, and I even tried my hand at cooking on the road more than once. But I always ended up making something rather simple and bland. If these had been on the market back then, I would have reached for them without hesitation, even at a higher price than the traditional preserves. Maintaining *this* fresh taste for three months is simply incredible.”

“Those were simply the oldest successful products that I had. They should last much longer in reality. As long as the pouch remains undamaged, I expect them to be edible and to taste similar to this for about a year.”

The merchants’ eyes widened.

“A year? That’s a long while,” Piolo said.

“I haven’t tested it out, but that’s my estimate,” I confirmed. Instant lunches like this were very popular in Japan. As long as I could recreate the important parts of those products, I expected my version to last at least a year.

“Also...” I turned to my trusty assistants.

“They’re ready,” they said, already bringing over the pots we had prepared earlier.

“This one contains boiled beans and potatoes that have been preserved in a similar fashion, but without any seasoning,” I said. These were akin to instant mashed potatoes. I demonstrated adding a packet of freeze-dried seasoning to make an instant bean and potato soup. I also took the dried noodles the maids had boiled back to life earlier and mixed in an instant pouch of pasta sauce.

Demonstrating this sort of instant cooking confirmed what the three merchants no doubt suspected from the beginning: there were more uses to these instant foods than just preserving a complete dish. Their interest had intensified with every new step of my demonstration.

“This technology could be used for long-distance travel or emergency

stockpiles, not to mention rations for adventurers or soldiers...and with the right types of food, it could even appeal to nobles, or perhaps people with dietary restrictions.” After all, I know I would love to have instant rice porridge if I were too sick to cook. Some people had dietary restrictions and cooking around those could be a lot of work, especially if they wanted their food to still taste good. That might not have been an issue for those who could afford a private chef, but otherwise, cooking every day could become a huge chore.

Preparing food was a chore that literally everyone had to deal with; as I demonstrated my instant food technology, I felt strongly that it could have a great impact on many people’s difficulties with preparing food and eating. That was why...

“I plan to seek the Duke’s guidance on how to handle this project. With how busy he is, I’ll have to wait until the new year, but that works out—I still need to experiment with the instant lunches some more and verify how long the food can be preserved in practice.”

Once I’d collected enough data, I wouldn’t have minded selling the manufacturing technique and rights to the Duke so that he could completely take over the process. In fact, that seemed like the better option, the more I thought about it. Instant food was too great of an enterprise for a commoner alone to run.

“That being said, I would love to seek your assistance when the time comes to officially start putting them on shelves. Is that all right with you?”

This, apparently, was an obvious choice for the merchants.

Piolo jumped in right away. “Who d’you think would turn down a deal like this? We gotta wait for Duke Reinhart’s decision, ’course, but you got my full support if he wants to make a business out of it!”

“Food isn’t my forte, but I can be involved with supplying and improving the pouches. We *did* just build the new factory. Should we build more?” Serge asked enthusiastically.

“How long would it take to prepare for mass production of the pouches?” I asked.

“We could start on a small batch immediately, but full-scale production will have to wait at least until next spring. The slime factory has its hands full with the regular waterproof fabric, rain gear, and the rubber products you introduced the other day,” Serge explained.

“Right. Dealing with the snow comes first,” I said.

“Yes... The good news is that the products are selling well, which means we have plenty of funds. As soon as demand for snow gear drops, we can spare staff for the pouches. I’ll make arrangements so we can start as soon as the Duke gives us the go-ahead.”

“That’s great. There’s no rush for this,” I said.

After that, we continued tasting the other instant dishes and discussed other uses and marketing strategies, as well as other things we could manufacture in Serge’s factory.

At last, our peaceful lunch meeting adjourned.

“Thank you for lunch,” Serge said.

“Those instant lunches were good!” Piolo exclaimed. “You got me all excited for the future, Ryoma!”

“Thank you for having us, Ryoma,” Clana said.

Time flies when you’re having fun. Knowing that this would probably be the last time we met up before the new year, I was tempted to ask them to stay a little longer, but then thought better of it. They were all busy people. To make the most of my time with them, at least, I walked them out of the room.

When we opened the door, we found five armed men surrounding us.

“Are you ready, Mister Morgan?” one of them asked.

Chapter 7, Episode 44: Call to Action

The five men who awaited us outside the meeting room door were clearly an organized team: each carried a sword and wore chain mail under his matching coat, embroidered with a golden hawk. I recognized the man who spoke and the designs on their coats. These were the mercenaries Serge had hired as his bodyguards.

“Thank you for your patience. Oh, that’s right.” Serge turned to me. “I haven’t introduced them to you yet. They are the Golden Wildhawks, a mercenary group I hired to guard me and my business.”

The man who had first spoken to Serge said, “I’m Vice Captain Yashuma.”

“I’m Ryoma Takebayashi. We met once in front of the Morgan storefront, I think. I appreciated your consideration when I had come without prior arrangements.”

“Our mission at the time was to guard the store. We would never interfere with business beyond the scope of our mission.”

That was a very professional response, illustrating that they kept a respectable distance between their client and themselves—no unnecessary questions. The five mercenaries looked a little intense now, probably because they were on the job. I didn’t sense any animosity from them, nor were they acting aggressively.

The mercenaries and I exchanged no further words as we all exited the building. En route, Yashuma subtly shifted to walk beside Serge, with me on the other side. The other four mercenaries were stationed ahead, behind, and on either side of the group. Even then, they remained unintrusive, communicating with each other and watching the passersby and any blind spots around us silently, so as not to interrupt our conversation. They pulled off this masterful coordination so naturally that I couldn’t help but watch them, impressed.

Soon, we’d arrived at the lobby, which had a reception counter for the entire

building. As we stepped into the space, however, the air shifted.

Like a faint scent of rotten flesh. Like an insect crawling up my back.

The feeling was hard to place, but it was visceral, and it replaced all logic in my brain with a gut feeling: *someone's watching*.

"On guard!" Yashuma shouted, evidently having sensed the same.

To our right, between two of the decorative aquarium tanks that looked like an empty space to the naked eye, I sensed a human-shaped silhouette of magical energy. I noticed the knife in the silhouette's hand as it came straight towards Serge. "To your right!" I called out reflexively, unspooling the wire slime from my left arm before throwing it like a bola at the silhouette. The attacker dodged the wire slime, nearly diving to the ground, and made a strange sound as it did so. That sound was enough to betray its location to the Wildhawks.

"Stop him!" The two guards to the left and right of our group attempted to form a wall between the attacker and Serge, although it looked like they still couldn't see the attacker. The Wildhawks must have acted on that single sound—or, in the case of the beastkin mercenaries, on the attacker's scent.

However, the attacker saw this and changed course. The Wildhawks' hesitation gave the assailant another chance to attack. The silhouette halted its charge and moved to throw its knife at Serge.

Not so fast! As I reached for the iron slime in my belt, Yashuma shifted his position to keep Serge behind him. Seeing that the mercenary had put himself between Serge and the incoming knife, I drew and threw the slime sword.

The sound of metal striking metal rang out just beside me, and a great spray of blood painted a whole section of the lobby. That seemed to break the spell. The air warped before my eyes, revealing a man wearing something like a full bodysuit.

"Grab him!" ordered a Wildhawk.

The mercenary closest to him put the attacker in a choke hold, and he went limp. How quickly he went down was a little off-putting, but I couldn't find any other attackers, even through magic detection.

Now that the immediate danger had been dealt with, I shifted my attention. The quick but bloody battle had naturally caused a commotion in the busy lobby, especially since it was midday. Serge and the Sionjis, while quiet, also seemed shaken by the encounter.

Yashuma gave me a look.

“Let’s turn back. We can’t very well leave him here,” I said to our group. We had to think about our next move.



That evening, two men were engaged in ominous conversation in the drawing room of a shop within Gimul.

“Progress report, Wanz?”

“All executed to your specifications.”

“With less than a week to plan, everything’s been done perfectly? There must be members who were unhappy about us taking over.”

“Naturally. Each of us has been working undercover in this city, anywhere from a few months to a few years, patiently laying the groundwork and performing subtle sabotage. Just when our efforts were about to come to fruition, our orders changed drastically. There’s little wonder that some of us would question how you’ve come out of the woodwork to give us new orders. Still, while your group and ours have different methods, we all belong to the underground guild. We respect the chain of command. I promise you our full effort to follow those orders and serve under your command.”

“Indeed. I trust you will. Let’s say all is going according to plan. I have one more order for you personally.”

“Anything.”

“Tell me everything you know about the boy Ryoma Takebayashi.”

Wanz froze for a moment. “I believe I gave you a detailed report about the boy.”

“I received it. Think of this as verification. Anything you know, no matter how insignificant it may seem. We have *our* orders to eliminate the boy as we

progress with our plan.”

“Eliminate the boy? It seems overkill for you to take on a single child. I dare say I pity him.” Despite what he said, Wanz could barely contain his ecstasy at the idea.

“I would be lying if I said we didn’t agree. But orders are orders. Besides, I hear the boy casts spells of a caliber far beyond his age.”

“He’s going around shoveling snow with some grand water magic contraption. Who knows how he’ll use magic in combat? He definitely holds a lot of magic energy. I hear he’s put a group of delinquent adventurers under his command by beating them in combat, but even I could tell they were amateurs. Well, he did give me some holier-than-thou speech and sabotage my operation. I suppose he has enough talent to back it up.”

“Is that all...?”

“What do you mean?”

“Midday today, *one of us* attempted an assassination on the president of the Morgan Trading Company. He hasn’t returned, and the president is still alive.”

“I understand why he was a target of assassination, since he was deeply involved with both the duke and the boy...but you think the boy thwarted the attempt? Morgan was constantly being guarded by several members of the Golden Wildhawks. I would assume they had a hand in it, rather than the boy.”

“We knew about the Golden Wildhawks, which was why the Unseen Blade was assigned the job. He had a great chance of pulling off the kill, even with the mercenaries there. The point of attack was within Ryoma Takebayashi’s security headquarters. We had gained intel that Morgan would join him there for lunch. We were ordered to stage the kill in front of the boy, if possible.”

“Still, I’ve already explained everything about the boy that might’ve aided him in combat. He could have used magic, if anything, but the odds of him holding out against the Unseen Blade... It would make more sense to think that a Wildhawk, an agent of the duke’s, or a high-level adventurer hired on to the security company had a hand in it. I can shed some more light on those possibilities.”

“Go on.”

Wanz continued to divulge his intel, bit by bit.

“I believe I’ve told you everything I know on these matters,” Wanz finally said.

“Very well,” the man replied.

Unfortunately, Wanz hadn’t just run out of information to share; he’d also run out of time. The other man thrust a dagger deep into Wanz’ sternum.

“Wh-What are you...?! I thought you were here...to help...!”

“If we hadn’t told you that, you would have fled without furthering our plans. Worthless scum that you are, I merely squeezed a modicum of usefulness out of you before your time was up.”

“No... Help...” Wanz’ final plea was unheard.

Once the man had confirmed that Wanz had drawn his last breath, he pulled his dagger out and wiped it on his victim’s clothes. Then he opened the door to reveal another man, who appeared to be an unremarkably dressed merchant.

“I’m done here,” the first man said. “Are we ready?”

“Yes, sir. The shop is fully rigged, with the office at its center.”

“Then we’re taking the body to the office. Use plenty of oil in this room.”

“Understood. Wanz had to be eliminated, then?”

“He seemed aware that he was a failure, but still believed wholeheartedly that he would be kept alive if he could only demonstrate his usefulness. For all that, he barely produced any valuable information. He only exhausted me with a tirade of presumptuous personal observations.”

“Perhaps as a member of the underground guild, he expected room for reconciliation. To us, he was just a disposable piece on the board.”

“If only he’d understood that, he would have been useful in some way, at least. But it’s all over now. The Unseen Blade still hasn’t returned?”

“Not according to his last scheduled communication.”

“I see. Even if it was a miscommunication, he won’t get the antidote in time.

We move on without him. Utilize a few pawns. While there is a chance the attempt was sabotaged by an unexpected third party, be on full alert when it comes to Ryoma Takebayashi. He makes a move, I know about it. Let's begin."

"Yes, sir!"

The pair of men swiftly carried Wanz' body out of the room.

When they returned, they poured a jug full of oil all over the room, stripped their robes onto the floor, set it all ablaze, and left.

It would be some time before Wanz' corpse was discovered...

Chapter 7, Episode 45: Catalyst to the Ordeal

In the early morning following Serge's attack, it was overcast, without moonlight or starlight. As the city of Gimul slumbered, waiting for morning to come, dots of light began to flicker in the sky. A chain of thunderclaps followed, rocking the city awake much earlier than it was accustomed to.

A roaring sound snapped a man out of his sleep. "Wh-What was that?!" he cried, looking to and fro in confusion. When he looked through his window, he froze a few moments in abject disbelief. Then he ran. "Hey, wake up! Everyone get up!"

"What's going on, dear? It's the middle of the night..."

"Get up, already! The house across the street's on fire!"

His wife bolted to their still half-asleep children as the man ran out into the street and shouted the news from door to door. Fear and confusion spread through the neighborhood in a flash, leaving people scrambling to evacuate or shouting to organize an attempt to extinguish the fire.

Similar scenes were unfolding all over the predawn city.

"Water! Open up the water tanks! Hurry!"

"Are there any neighbors you haven't seen yet?! Wake up everyone!"

"Take the children somewhere safe!"

"Someone contact the security teams!"

Breathing heavily, a man came running around the corner. "Th-This is bad!"

"What are you, blind?! We know! Just move!"

"N-No! I'm not talking about *this* fire! That shop over there is on fire, and a bunch of other buildings too. I can't even count how many fires there are! There's not enough manpower to go around! Security? What security? They're not going to make it here anytime soon!"

The news rattled the neighbors—who'd been busy with the fire—even more. Dread colored their faces. It seemed only a matter of time before the whole city burned to the ground.

“Make way!” a boy shouted over the cacophony, accompanied by the sound of rushing water. People turned to the voice to find a pair of figures riding a small boat atop an incoming wave. One of them was a boy wearing strange clothes.

At this point, many of the people on the street knew just who it was that had arrived. People cleared the way. Before those who knew Ryoma could even call his name, the torrential wave carrying Ryoma's boat rushed past and pooled in front of the burning building. Without missing a beat, the surge of water rose high into the air, then came down upon the fire like a roaring waterfall. At the same time, it began gathering piles of snow and dirt into itself too—it was as if an enormous slime were trying to engulf the building. Before long, a huge blob of muddy water wobbled around the building, weakening the fire within a matter of seconds. Relief crept into the onlookers' faces now that the immediate danger had been eliminated.

Meanwhile, a man called, “H-Hey, you!” to Ryoma atop his boat, obviously agitated. He was the same man who had brought the message about the city burning all over to the neighbors. All out of sorts, he ran over to Ryoma's boat, shouting, “What's going on?! There's fires all over the city! You have the security teams and your project! If you know something about this, you better tell us now! And it's great that you put out the fire, but what if there were still people inside—”

The man gasped and suddenly took a step back.

Ryoma was staring at him, unblinking. His face betrayed no emotion whatsoever. With the fire put out, the street was dark again, so only the man interrogating Ryoma noticed his look...until his silence drew the attention of the crowd.

“You look *scary* again,” Hudom said, standing atop the boat next to Ryoma. “I know controlling your magic is intensive work, but...”

“I'm sorry about that. It might have looked like I was glowering,” Ryoma said

in his usual tone. He turned to the crowd to answer the man's question. "There's no one inside the building; I verified that with magic as I arrived. All I know is that there are several fires throughout the city. I rushed out onto the street so I could start putting them out. However, my security company is working alongside the Adventurer's Guild to investigate and extinguish these fires." His words, along with the absence of an immediate threat, seemed to placate the crowd, although it still seemed agitated. Ryoma continued. "I won't ask you not to worry! This is a serious situation. Protect yourself, first and foremost! Then, if possible, please help us evacuate the city and put out these fires! The more hands we have, the better. Thank you!" he called over the murmuring crowd.

Hearing this, the onlookers began to recognize what had to be done.

"You bet I'll help!"

"We can't just stand by and watch!"

"Thank you!" Ryoma answered. "Oh! My hospital is preparing to take in anyone who is injured. Don't hesitate to go there if you feel it necessary!" As the crowd began to stir into action, Ryoma looked to the man who first spoke to him. "You, sir."

"Who, me?"

"If you don't mind, could you deliver a message to the constabulary? If only to tell them there was a fire here and that it's been extinguished?"

"S-Sure, I can do that."

"Thank you! Then, get on."

"What?"

"I'm headed to the next fire, and it's on the way to the constabulary. Let's ride together as much as we can. It's faster," Ryoma urged.

His tone was rather demanding, but in the current state of emergency, no one thought that Ryoma was overstepping a boundary. In fact, the crowd looked accusingly at the man, who was hesitating to climb onto Ryoma's boat. It didn't take long for the silent pressure to get to him, as he hurriedly leapt onto the

boat.

“Let’s go!” Ryoma called, and the murky water encasing the building burst, flowed out, and rushed under the boat again.

As the current picked up speed, Hudom spoke to the man aboard. “Sorry about that. My boss is a bit assertive today.”

“No, it wasn’t right of me to talk to you like that,” the man said. “This whole thing has gotten me flustered.”

“I appreciate that,” Hudom replied. “Like I said, it’s very taxing for him just to keep this spell going.”

“It’s that bad...?”

“Oh, yeah. Takes a ton of magical energy. And it needs to be meticulously controlled, so he needs to be completely focused on that, if we’re going this fast. Can’t even talk to him right now. That’s why I’m riding along, so I can help him. Which reminds me—I have to do some work too.” Hudom began working at the back of the boat.

The man quietly observed Ryoma and Hudom. Making sure that Hudom was preoccupied and Ryoma wasn’t looking at him, he stealthily reached for his belt and drew his dagger. He’d crept up on Ryoma from behind and was going to thrust the blade into his back...when suddenly Ryoma spun around and struck his wrist with a wire slime. As the man dropped the dagger in pain, Hudom grabbed his arm from behind and twisted him to the ground, slamming his face into the deck and holding him there.

“H-How...?” the man muttered.

“We’ve been expecting an agent like you.” Ryoma swiftly wrapped the wire slime around the man’s neck and choked him out.

“Beautiful work,” Hudom said, “but are you sure you didn’t want to ask him a few questions?”

“We don’t have time. Besides, he has to be disposable at this stage.”

“I suppose you’re right. If he’d been privy to anything important, he would have gotten away with the help of his allies, or been silenced by them... Either

way, he wouldn't have ended up with us. But how much easier would it be if catching this one guy could give us their whole plan?"

"It must have been his job to frighten the crowd and worsen the confusion in the city," Ryoma said. "He did start things with us, but I don't think he planned to find us... My guess is that he was testing his superiors' patience because of us and rushed to produce results for self-preservation. He took the first bait we dangled in front of him."

"Sounds about right. I'm impressed you saw through him, though. He seems like some sort of undercover agent. I didn't think there was anything too suspicious about what he said until he drew his blade at you."

"About that... Apparently I've acquired the Ill Will Detection and Animosity Detection skills, somehow. Earlier today—yesterday, now—when Serge was attacked, one of the guards, Yashuma, pointed it out, and I confirmed it by checking the status board. I hadn't checked mine in a long time, but I might have had them already when we first met," Ryoma explained.

"Right. You were really on edge back then. You're saying that while you didn't realize it at the time, you had grown sensitive to the ill will around the city."

"Well, my reaction back then... I haven't been faced with much animosity lately. The people around me now are mostly kind and generous. I'd like to think...it was like I was a starving person who suddenly ate a giant feast, and my body rejected it. Something like that." Ryoma chuckled cynically.

"But that's how you prevented yesterday's attack, right?" Hudom said. "That's a good thing."

"Sensing his animosity helped, but I was lucky that my practice of detecting magical forces with slimes worked well against the assailant's power."

"It's been said that purposefully learning those detection skills is very difficult. It's a real advantage if you ever need to look for a bodyguard gig too. It won't hurt you, in any case. I didn't think slimes could detect that well, though. I'm impressed."

"I assume it's difficult without great compatibility with slimes. Besides, it gave me a wicked headache before I got used to it, so many people may not notice

they're developing the skill, or may find it too troublesome to use. I could handle the pain, and I was driven by my curiosity for slime behavior."

"I certainly haven't met anyone more passionate about slimes than you, Chief."

"Plenty of people are passionate about them," Ryoma said. "You wouldn't know this, but there are three former slime researchers working at the laundry shop, for example."

"Wait, really?"

"Not that I consider myself less passionate than them in any way... Well, we're almost at the next spot."

"Got it. We do have a job to do."

"Let's do whatever we can," Ryoma said, hastening the boat as he gazed up at the darkened sky.

Chapter 7, Episode 46: The City Stirs

“The lumber yard’s on fire, of all places! How’d they let this happen?!”

“It’s burning too hot! We can’t put it out!”

“Don’t give up! We can’t let it spread!”

“Dammit! I keep slipping in this snow!”

Every time Ryoma put out a fire with magic and moved on to the next, it seemed like another building was set ablaze. Even with his exceptional slime magic, Ryoma couldn’t deal with this many fires erupting all over the city.

Presently, a carriage halted before one of the fires.

“We’re here to help!” Asagi, an A-rank adventurer, called from his seat beside the coachman.

“You guys adventurers?” called one of the men who had been attempting to put out the fire.

“We need water! Can anyone use water magic?!” shouted another.

“Worry not, good fellows!” Asagi answered. “Leipin!”

“Already ahead of you! Wind magic squad, execute plan B!” Leipin answered, and he and seven others leapt off the carriage. The spellcasters surrounded the burning building; as soon as they were in position, they began casting their spells.

“Did you say *wind* magic?!” shouted the man who had greeted the squad, now running to intercept Leipin. “Are you out of your mind?! Wind magic would set this whole block on fire—”

Asagi swiftly stepped between the two. “You speak soundly, but I must ask you not to interfere. Trust us.”

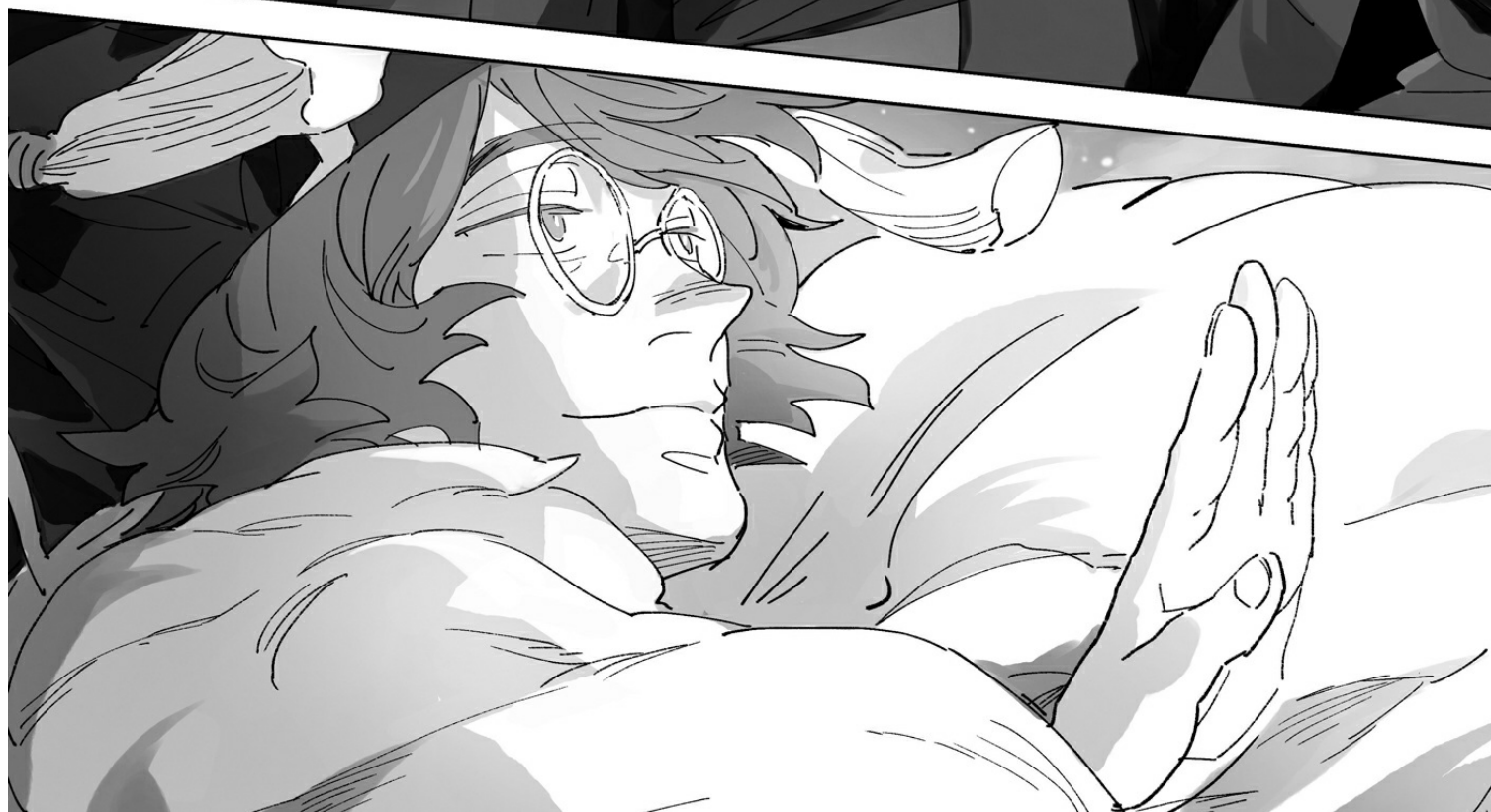
While the exchange took place, the spellcasters completed their job.

“Become a curtain that splits the atmosphere.”

“Become a shield that keeps the flame at bay.”

A double layer of barrier magic materialized around the fire. The spells prevented more oxygen from reaching the fire and prevented any embers from flying onto neighboring buildings.

“Damn right, I’m gonna interfere! This isn’t the time to mess...around...” The first man trailed off.



Now he stood watching the fire visibly diminish. “H-How’d that fire go out so quickly?!?”

“I’m no scholar,” Asagi said shortly, “but I’ve been told it’s an application of barrier magic.”

This information rippled through the crowd rapidly until the people began cheering in amazement.

“You guys are awesome!”

“Thank you!”

“The fire may be weakened, but it’s not out yet,” Asagi replied. “There are still more fires! You can thank us later!”

“Exactly!” Leipin chimed in. “Leave us to handle this fire and go aid in fighting the others! As soon as we’re done here, we will join you!”

The crowd answered this call with great enthusiasm.

“All right, let’s do this!”

“Where’s the next one?!?”

“Splendid! Allow me to... Heat Conduction!” Leipin chanted, and the snow on the street melted before their eyes, revealing the cobbled street once again.

“That should improve your footing somewhat.”

“Whoa! L-Let’s go!”

With their morale boosted, the crowd ran up the bare streets in all directions.

In no time at all, only the magic squad was left at the scene of the fire.

“Was that last spell necessary?” Asagi asked.

“If our enemy’s aim is to stoke fear in the people of Gimul, the more we can reassure them, the better,” said Leipin.

“I won’t deny that, but your magical energy isn’t bottomless.”

“Worry not. Ryoma brought these in by the case full. Don’t ask me where he got it from.” Leipin held open his winter coat to reveal five vials.

“Magic recovery potions,” Asagi noted.

“Made from the rare running shroom. Highly effective and equally as expensive. He gave them to me and told me to use them without hesitation if I felt it necessary. And while I do focus my efforts on research, I am an A-rank adventurer. I know not to waste my magical energy. Just now, instead of generating heat to melt the snow, I simply redirected the heat from the fire. I barely spent any magical energy. Melting the snow even helped diminish the fire,” Leipin explained.

“Ryoma showed you that too?”

“Indeed. In exchange for our assistance, he openly shared with us his *scientific knowledge*—what we call natural order—about fire. Part of the core of how magic *is*. As a fire mage, I had accumulated some knowledge, mostly through trial and error, but it was very valuable to have him explain these things to me logically, from a different point of view. You saw how his knowledge allowed us to put out that fire with just a few barrier spells thrown together. For the value of what he’s given me, the least I can do is give it my all.”

“Ryoma must be pulling out all the stops to protect the city. In any case, you use your magic as you see fit as long as we can put out these fires.”

“And I’m counting on you to watch our backs while we do,” Leipin said.

At this point, another carriage arrived on the scene, carrying members of the security company.

One of them announced, “Thank you for containing the fire. Security Squad 7 will take it from here. Command center says for you guys to head to the next fire.”

Asagi’s team took the place of the security officers on the carriage. Once they’d all climbed aboard, the coachman set off without hesitation. The team of magical firefighters was headed in the direction of the especially devastating fires.

At the site of one of the other fires, a man was calling for help from the attic of a burning building. The second story windows belched flame and smoke. “Help...!” he cried, erupting into a fit of coughing.

“I’m coming to help you!” his wife called.

“No!” Another woman was holding her back. “If you go in now, you won’t make it out alive!”

“Let me go! I’m not going to watch my husband die in there!”

“Calm down! Somebody give me a hand!” the woman called to the people around her.

The trapped man’s wife cried in anguish, and the onlookers were beginning to lose hope.

Just then, ten men arrived on the scene in an extra large carriage. Each of them wore a strange fire-red uniform, a helmet, and a mask on their shoulder. Ryoma had recreated fire suits as best as he could based on his memory and with the help of others. Made of monster parts and magical items, the suits were fire-and heatproof, despite their off-putting appearance.

The crowd on the scene watched the team incredulously at first, until one of them recognized the men. “You’re the Brawny Boys!”

“That’s right. We’re from the security corp. We got this. Is there anyone other than that man trapped inside?” replied one of the firefighters.

“H-He’s the only one! We were trying to put out the fire next door by pouring water on it from above. All of a sudden, some shady guy throws something into *that* building, and it’s up in flames,” explained an onlooker.

“Got it. He’ll be all right. Are we ready?!” the lead firefighter called to his squadmates.

“Anytime!” the squad replied. They’d detached their carriage from the horses and turned it to face the burning structure.

“Good! Deploy the ladder!” ordered the leader.

They unloaded a tall ladder from the carriage and stood it upright on its legs, then extended it to twice its length. The squad swiftly reinforced the ladder with the carriage, then maneuvered the carriage underneath the attic window and hooked the ladder onto it. As soon as the ladder was set up, the trapped man tried to jump out, and two firefighters scrambled up to help him escape the suffocating smoke.

The crowd cheered at the rescue.

“They got him!”

“Your husband’s safe!”

The firefighters carried the man down the ladder and were met with a relieved outcry from his wife.

The firefighters still had work to do.

“Step back, please!” they called. “Don’t shove those around you!”

“The fire is still burning! Please keep a safe distance!”

One of them turned to the stranded man’s wife. “This way, ma’am! We’re taking your husband to the hospital!”

As half of the squad helped keep the crowd safe, the other half was gearing up, the leader calling out protocol and the rest of them responding.

“Suit check!”

“Suit check!!!”

“Masks on!”

“Masks on!!!”

“Charge!”

The team stormed into the burning building, much to the shock of the onlookers. In addition to their suits, the team equipped their protective masks before entering. The masks included an oxygen-generating magical item, so the firefighters could breathe freely in the smoke-filled building, and a cooling magical item, to prevent their airways from getting burned by the scorching air. The suit was a product of Ryoma’s full extent of knowledge as well as the craftsmanship of an artisan who specialized in monster parts and magical items—it allowed the firefighters to withstand the inferno, albeit for only a short time. In that short time, the firefighters would extinguish the fire as much as possible.

Communicating via hand signals, the firefighters activated the magical item on their backs, which was a sort of fire extinguisher that sprayed an

extinguishing solution from a nozzle.

The solution contained potassium carbonate, which made it more effective at putting out fires than pure water; it was highly effective at rapidly reducing the flames in the building. Of course, that alone would not be enough to entirely extinguish the flames. While the first team kept the fire at bay, another team was assembling on the street, including a carriage loaded with an enormous water tank made of hardening solution. Once they arrived, the firefighting was more efficient than ever, to the further relief of the onlookers.

And yet the firefighters kept working.

“Make way! We’re taking anyone who’s hurt to the hospital! Make way!”

“If you are injured and can walk, please come over here! Same if you’re evacuating your home!”

“The carriages will keep coming! Please don’t run!”

Even though most of them did not have a long history with Gimul or its people, the drive to help as many of them as possible kept them going.



What were the citizens of Gimul doing? Not standing by and watching their city burn, that was for sure.

“That oughta do it!”

“This one’s out!”

“This fire’s out too!”

“You see any more fires?!”

“This way! They started another one!”

“The hell?! Let’s go! Anyone who can, follow me!”

“I’m gonna kill whoever’s doing this!”

“We need more hands over here! Got an old man who can’t move!”

“I’ll get him!”

The people were aiding in evacuations and firefighting to the best of their

abilities.

Then someone shouted, “I found the perp!”

The arsonist, who was about to set fire to a trash can in a narrow alley, turned to flee.

“Not so fast.” A man popped out from around the corner in front of the arsonist, struck him in the gut with the pommel of his lance, then brought the lance’s shaft down on the man’s cranium. The flawless combo easily knocked him out.

Soon, the men who had been firefighting caught up to the lancer. “Good job, Jeff!”

“I don’t need your kudos! Go put out that fire! The constables will take him,” said Jeff. “There they are now.”

“Excuse me! B-rank adventurer Jeff, I presume. Is this the arsonist on the ground?”

“Yeah. Got a witness right here.” Jeff pointed at the man who had joined him. “And here’s proof.” He opened the arsonist’s coat with the end of his lance. A fire-starting magical item and a bottle full of oil came tumbling out.

“You caught him red-handed, then,” said the constable. “We’ll take him in. Can we leave you to put out this fire?”

“We can do it, right?” asked Jeff.

“No problem. We can handle a little fire like that one!” said his friend, and he rejoined the firefighting efforts.

Jeff gazed up at the sky, then darted into another alley.

The people of Gimul were fighting tooth and nail against the fires erupting throughout the city.

Chapter 7, Episode 47: The Security Company Meeting Room

“Another fire up north. Let’s call it North-4. The first responder team has finished the rescue at North-3, and the follow-up team is now on the scene. Still, evacuation in the area is falling behind.”

“East-5 was just extinguished.”

“South-8 too.”

“More and more fires in the north... Send a cleanup crew and observation team to each spot that was just extinguished. Have them send the firefighters at East-5 and South-8 out north. We can help with evacuation by sending officers on spare carriages. Will two squads do it, Jill?”

“That should be enough to call for evacuation. The follow-up teams will do the same. Send as many carriages as we can. I’m concerned with the occupancy of the shelters. How are they?”

“The north and west shelters are doing fine. Plenty of room. South and east shelters aren’t full yet, but are starting to fill up.”

“Then, all evacuees up north should go to the north shelter. Call to set up the temporary shelter too. On the empty lot in the former slums, like we’ve planned.”

“An arsonist responsible for a few of the fires has been apprehended in the west. The constabulary has already taken him into custody.”

In contrast to the commotion on the streets of Gimul, the meeting room within the security company headquarters was occupied by a task force exchanging quiet reports and commands. A large desk stood in the center of the room, and a detailed map of the city sprawled across it. Surrounding the table, one team was moving markers and pieces all over the map according to each report. At every turn, the president and vice president of the company—Hughes and Jill—gave orders. An employee standing behind them swiftly wrote down

their commands and delivered them to one of the cages that housed small monsters tasked with delivering these messages. Tension was heavy in the air; the gravity of the situation hushed the operation.

Presently, three of the Duke's maids entered the room. They pushed a small drink cart into the room and began handing out beverages to the teams.

"Thanks, Lulunese," Hughes said. "Take one, Jill. We'll be here awhile."

"You're right. We all have to take a breather sooner or later." Jill's expression remained stern as she took a drink for herself.

Hughes tasked Lulunese to take over the room temporarily as he took Jill aside and whispered, "What's with the grim attitude? I know it ain't no picnic in the woods, but we're dealing with this better than expected."

"Right... We have the comms team of tamers who can synchronize with their familiars, a message delivery web utilizing synchronization, and our bases to keep watch and communicate with each other. Thanks to those tools, we can work closely with the guilds, constabulary, and the government."

"What did Ryoma call it, a 'phone operator'? Whatever that means. I can't cast any taming magic, but it's impressive stuff," said Hughes.

"*Phone*... That's a method of communication used in ancient times, said to connect even distant lands with each other. It's assumed to be some sort of magical item that utilizes space magic, but it's doubtful the thing ever existed. Ryoma must have taken inspiration from the legend of it. We only have this setup thanks to Ryoma's funds and all the free time on the hands of the tamers who'd be delivering the post if it weren't for the snow. It's scary to imagine how worse things would be without this network," Jill said.

"I don't wanna think about that either," Hughes agreed. "But why do you keep looking like that, if you know we got a system we can rely on? Breathe a little."

"Maybe...it's because I'm disappointed in myself."

"Disappointed?" Hughes repeated. "Oh. You're still thinking about what Serge's bodyguard said to you?"

After the assassination attempt on Serge, the group had returned to the meeting room. Hughes's team had rushed to join them, and they had held another meeting to decide their next move. Since the team had already planned out as many emergency action plans as possible, the meeting had concluded quickly once the group had reached the consensus that the enemy was changing to more direct, dangerous tactics—that the enemy was no longer trying to conceal their presence.

After the meeting, the group had gone on to discuss how they would prioritize their safety. Serge would return and remain in his shop while the Sionjis would leave the city as soon as it became feasible. At this point, Jill had suggested Ryoma find a safe location for himself and had tried to convince Yashuma to temporarily protect Ryoma...and had been immediately shut down.

“Can you tell me why?” Jill had persisted. “Not that I think money is your sole motivator, but I am ready to pay a proper wage. Isn't there any room for negotiation?”

“I'm sorry, but my answer won't change. It's for three reasons. First, I must adhere to our organization's code. We are currently protecting Mister Serge and his company at large. Some mercenaries handle more than one job at once, but we forbid it. This job is about trust. We fully commit our resources to every contract. Second, while we don't pick and choose whom to protect as long as they can pay, there are some clientele that we prefer not to guard for various reasons. Chief among them are those who are unaware of our protection. If they have more than a healthy sense of confidence in their mediocre abilities, it makes matters far worse. Not that I think he would fit that bill, but I doubt he shares your sentiment. In fact, he is preparing to tackle whatever danger may come his way head-on. It's incredibly difficult to protect someone who *wants* to jump into danger.” Yashuma had given Jill time to respond, but she had only remained silent. “Lastly, we have decided he does not need our protection.”

“Doesn't need it?” Jill asked.

“During the attack just now, he handled himself as well as any of us—he even spotted the assailant before any of us did. After getting a good idea of his abilities, I've reached the conclusion that he's certainly skilled enough to protect himself. His abilities are not at all mediocre, which would make our

protection obsolete. And..." Yashuma turned to Ryoma. "You have little experience fighting in a team, so you prefer to fight alone."

"Yes," Ryoma answered. "I'm impressed you figured out all that in a matter of seconds."

Yashuma returned his attention to Jill. "There you have it. Not only would our protection be obsolete, we might even get in his way if we tried to fight alongside him without properly training together first. I never thought I would say this about a child half my age, but...if he ever wants to join the Golden Wildhawks, I'd welcome him with open arms. He wouldn't even need to go through the entrance trial we hold for recruits. That's how much I believe he doesn't require anyone's protection. Of course, I understand that those close to him still can't help but feel concerned for his safety."

Jill sighed and said, "That's not all. Remember how Hudom said I was overprotective?"

"Yeah, now that you mention it," Hughes agreed. "What about it?"

"I thought...Ryoma could live his life like a normal child. He *is* a child. So I thought he should rely on us. Be protected by us. And I still believe that. But maybe I was subconsciously *forcing* Ryoma to be a 'normal child.' It's not like Ryoma doesn't understand that we worry about him."

"Yeah, Ryoma did seem apologetic when he rejected the idea of having guards on him or waiting somewhere safe."

"Ryoma can put out fires with his magic far faster than we can, and it's not even close. If I were only considering our situation and the abilities of those on our team, not using his skill set would not be an option. I'm sure Ryoma would agree. I don't think it was wrong for me to be concerned for him, but I regretted that I made a suggestion contrary to what Ryoma wanted. There's no time for any of that now, though," Jill said.

"So that makes you tense up when you're concentrating."

"If that's what you saw, it must be. I can't think of any other cause for it. I'll try to be more relaxed."

“Good. Like I said, we’ll be here for a while. It’ll be a real problem if you run out of steam before it’s over. Just talk it out with Ryoma once the dust settles. That’s gotta be a lot easier than trying to get a solution out of a parenting book — Hey, why are you looking at me like that?”

“How did you know I’ve been reading one?”

“Huh? Wait, you were reading one too?”

“What?”

The couple stood there staring at each other for a few moments until Lulunese joined in.

“I’m sorry to interrupt. I believe Hughes is talking about the book I was reading just to prepare for the future. He took a peek and said that he didn’t really ‘get it.’ Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah,” Hughes answered and turned back to Jill. “Sounds like you were reading one too, just to figure out how to face Ryoma.”

Jill’s face turned bright red.

Hughes continued, “Jill... Maybe you are overprotective.”

Jill was speechless at this, but then a quiet guffaw came from the center of the room. Jill turned to the sound to find the shoulders of several members shaking. Clearly everybody could hear their conversation, relieving some of the tension in the room.

Jill cleared her throat. “Excuse me. While being too stressed won’t do us any good, neither will being too distracted. Let us stay focused on our task.” The tamers in the room snapped back to the map at once, but the air in the room remained lighter than before. Still blushing, Jill muttered to herself, “Should I be happy that I ended up relaxing the room...?”

Meanwhile, the very dignified communications department carried on with their tasks.

Chapter 7, Episode 48: Defending the Storefront

At this point, the city of Gimul had been in turmoil for three hours. Ryoma was magically steering his boat through the city, wrapped up in the cat and mouse game of arsonists and firefighters, when suddenly he turned as if someone had called out to him.

A moment later, he set back on course.

“What’s wrong?” Hudom asked.

“I was pinged by the slimes I stationed at the laundry shop and trash plant. They’re being attacked,” said Ryoma.

“This late in the game, no less. You don’t want to check on them?”

“Trouble’s brewing all over the city, and more of their agents are starting to crawl out.” Ryoma produced a vial from his jacket, downed the magic recovery potion in it, then fed magical energy to the slime synchronized with the torrent whirling under his boat, hastening the boat down the road. “Fay and the others are at the shop, and are prepared to protect the employees who don’t fight. If I let this delay us dealing with other attacks, I’d be giving them exactly what they want. Are you ready to fight?” Ryoma asked.

“Of course.”

“Then we’re going in!” Ryoma declared.

The boat skidded out onto the street like a car on ice, sliding in beside another burning building. It bowled over some of the adventurer-looking goons attacking the firefighters.

“Whoa! I know it’s an emergency, but I was hoping for a more *leisurely* disembarkation!” Hudom called to deaf ears as he slugged the attacker closest to him.

This attack was the tip of the iceberg of the seemingly never-ending pandemonium that racked the city.



Meanwhile, on the street facing the Bamboo Forest laundry shop, security officer Ox was facing off against twenty or so adventurers. The tension in the air was palpable.

“I’m telling you,” one of the adventurers said, “we’re here to help guard the shop. This kid named Ryoma hired us.”

“I wasn’t told of any such arrangement. Walk away.”

“Look around you. It’s tough to get a message across town in times like this. Just check with your boss, will you?”

“No need. The owner himself has left me in charge of defending this place. And said explicitly that neither he nor any additional personnel would be coming,” said Ox.

The adventurer persisted. “Don’t you think your boss could have changed his mind—”

“Whatever.” Another adventurer, standing behind the first, drew his sword.

“H-Hey!”

“Shut up. It was gonna end this way regardless. Would’ve been cleaner if we’d gotten inside, but if he’s not opening the door, we gotta waste him.”

“R-Right,” the first adventurer stammered. “We don’t have time to debate...or to deal with any passersby.”

That settled it. The rest of the men drew their weapons; they flashed ominously in the light pouring out of the laundry shop.

Ox watched them and simply said, “You’re going to kill me, you say?”

“Ha!” scoffed the one who drew first. “Your days in the Colosseum are done, *Champ!* How are you gonna use two swords with one arm? Surround his ass and he won’t stand a chance! Let’s go!”

The men roared and encircled Ox. The same man leapt first, swinging his sword down towards Ox’s right shoulder. Before the blade could reach his flesh, it shattered spectacularly.

Ox was standing opposite the man, holding his sword high in a reverse grip.

“Huh?” the man said dully.

“Should have trained harder.” Ox switched the grip on his machete-like sword and swung it down towards the adventurer’s right shoulder. Although Ox had only struck him with the dull end, the immense strength behind the blow shattered the man’s collarbone through his flimsy pauldron and nearly decimated his lung.

The adventurer gasped in pain. He tried to step away from Ox and tumbled over his feet and onto the ground. With just his left arm, he crawled away like a caterpillar.

Ox spared him only one more look. He parried the thrust of another adventurer’s lance, then swiftly snapped the arm that held it.

As a man charged with a knife from behind, Ox took a step forward and circled around to crush the attacker’s hand with his sword. Then he struck the man on the chin with the pommel of his sword, sending him flying as if he’d been hit with a carriage.

That sight—along with the realization that three of their men had been incapacitated in a matter of seconds—nailed the feet of the remaining adventurers to the ground.

“Is that it?” Ox taunted. “I may have lost my left hand, but I can still swing one sword. You must have expected that much.”

“Dammit, we gotta attack him all at once! He can’t stop us *all* with one sword!” one of them called out, urging his comrades to action. The group fanned out to surround him.

“As if,” said Ox.

The assailants were awestruck as Ox’s *other* sword independently floated out of its sheath, spun in the air before Ox, and settled where it would have been if Ox had a hand to hold it there.

“The sword’s...floating?!”

“Damn! He uses magic too?!”

“Beastkin don’t have much magical energy! He’ll run out of stamina in no time!”

“Well, then,” replied Ox, “I simply need to end this battle quickly.” For the first time in this fight, Ox made the first move. His floating sword flew to the center of the group that was surrounding him, while Ox charged the adventurer on the far right of the formation. As soon as Ox had deflected yet another blade coming his way, his other sword flew back to him, striking the man’s head with its pommel.

Even after he’d lost his left arm, Ox had never given up being a swordsman. As a last-ditch effort to regain his former fighting style, Ox had learned to wield one of his swords with magic. With the help of Ryoma and his long-term magical recovery potions, Ox could levitate his sword much longer and with greater accuracy than before.

“H-Help!”

“You damn— Whoa!”

“Aaaagh!”

The flying sword naturally commanded a larger area than the one Ox wielded in his physical hand. Holding the group at bay with the flying sword, Ox picked off the attackers one by one as they fell out of formation.

“I’m not going down today!” One of them decided to gambit, realizing that they stood no chance in the long haul. Alas, his blade was deflected by Ox’s right sword. Ox parried the attacks with a combination of delicate technique and brutal strength. Offense on the left; defense on the right. His swords danced, tearing through his opponents like a tornado.

When half of their men had fallen without so much as getting near Ox, let alone striking a blow on him, the adventurer who had moved farthest from the one-armed guardian began focusing magical energy in the palm of his hand.

“Fireba—”

His spell, however, would not come to fruition.

“Agh! What the hell is this dart...?!” He turned his head to look at the

projectile stuck in his shoulder, which had stopped his spellcasting. In the second since it had landed, the dart was already working wonders, immobilizing the man's arm with pain.

"What's wrong?" another attacker called. "What's this smoke?!"

A thick cloud of smoke now stood behind them, working with the darkness of night to block out their view. It would have been plausible for some smoke to drift their way from any of the nearby fires, but the men did not realize while they were preoccupied with Ox that the smoke had surrounded them like a barrier. They realized a moment too late that the smoke was part of an attack.

"Damn—"

"Argh!"

"Who's there?! Show yourself!"

The men shouted in vain as darts flew out of the smoke and pierced their limbs, putting them out of commission. As the remaining men tried to pinpoint their opponent in the smoke from the trajectory of the darts, Dolce and Fay—fellow security guards of the laundry shop—joined the fray.

Dolce struck the man closest to him in the head with his lance and receded back into the smoke. Fay moved behind another adventurer without a sound and swiftly dragged him into the smoke. Just as the attackers' attention was diverted to the shadows in the smoke, another flurry of poison darts shot out. Even as the smoke dispatched some of the adventurers, Ox was steadily knocking out more of them, one by one. At this point, there were only three adventurers left who were in any condition to fight.

"Dammit!" one of them blurted out.

"What the— Don't run away!"

"We'll be killed!"

"Screw that! We're dead either way! I'm gonna take my chances!" He charged into the smoke, and a second later, a scream came from it.

"There's no way out," said one of the survivors.

"What the hell is going on?!" the other cried. "Why are these guys doing

security detail for a small shop like this?! I was supposed to get out of enslavement... This isn't fair. We've been set up! We were set up!"

The pair had completely lost the will to fight and were soon apprehended.

"Took a quick look around. No other hostiles," Lilyn said.

"Thank you," Ox replied. "And for the backup. Same goes for you, Fay, Dolce."

"Don't you think you would have any trouble without us?"

"It would have been arduous to field long-range attacks," said Ox. "And I don't have much experience in pursuing and detaining opponents who flee. I doubt I would have been defeated had I been alone, but I might have let the first one slip away."

Fay chuckled. "Nowhere to run in the colosseum, after all. We are better at this than fighting head-on. And the slimes he let us borrow made it really easy." He glanced at a bamboo pipe attached to his belt. The smoke began flowing back into the bamboo through a small hole, like a long strand of rope.

It was a smoke slime that had evolved from an ash slime. It normally took the form of a granular pile, like the ash slime. But since its particles were small enough to float in the air, the smoke slime could disperse or concentrate itself upon command, similar to how ash or sand slimes operated.

Lilyn showed off the slime wrapped around her wrist like a bracelet. "Me too. It gives me as many darts as I need. Had to adjust the dose a bit, but that's a small problem." She wore a sting slime evolved from a poison slime.

"Good for detaining too. I never thought I'd sign a contract with a slime..." On Dolce's shoulder sat a spider slime that spun a web more durable than a sticky slime. The adventurers were currently bound by its web.



When Dolce was first hired, he could not use any magic. He had little magical energy in him, and not much talent in the art of spellcasting. Since he'd grown up in the slums with no suitable tutor in the skill, he'd never even considered learning magic to be an option for him. However, as he'd continued working as a security guard at Bamboo Forest, he'd started earning a disposable income and free time. He had used both of them for self-improvement, training to use elementary enhancement skills. It helped a lot that he had Ryoma and Maria, who managed the slimes at the shop, along with Fay and Lilyn, who studied magic that aligned with their previous career path, who could all provide answers to most questions he had about learning magic.

As a result, Dolce had mastered basic taming magic and signed a contract with a spider slime Ryoma had provided. Along with Fay and Lilyn, he had successfully bolstered the security of Bamboo Forest.

"With the other staff set up in that room, we simply need to deal with any enemies that come our way," Ox said. "But these can't be the best fighters at our enemy's disposal."

"They probably weren't that good of adventurers either," Dolce said. "They probably couldn't make it and got mixed up with a loan shark."

"The ones that tried to sneak up to the dorm said something about debt too," Lilyn chimed in.

Dolce turned to the assailants tied up on the ground. "This is something grown-ups told me when I was growing up in the slums... Nasty loan sharks can have connections with *illegal* slave traders. Illegal slaves have no rights or dignity that are supposed to be protected by law. The buyers won't treat them any better either. If you bail, they go after your family."

"I see," Ox said. "Not to excuse them from their decisions, but I do feel some sympathy as someone who was sold into slavery to settle my debts."

To prepare for more attacks, the four of them decided to take turns and keep watch. Ox was left standing in front of the shop as he waited for the security personnel to take the attackers away. As he stood there, he couldn't help but appreciate his good fortune in being sold to a reputable slave trader, which had

led to him living a normal life. At the same time, he renewed his resolution to protect the shop and its employees at all costs.

Any would-be assailants would find it difficult to go through Ox. Any stealthy mode of attack would be thwarted by the two former assassins in the shadows. In addition, they would have to contend with Dolce and their slimes, who had become stronger with consistent hard work.

Even in Ryoma's absence, Bamboo Forest was steadfastly protected.

Chapter 7, Episode 49: Defending the Trash Plant

“You’ll be all right for now,” said Ryoma to one of the injured. “You should visit the hospital for proper treatment, though.”

“Oh, thank you. I’m so glad you’re here,” the man replied.

“We’re all set over here, Chief,” Hudom called. “Lucky for us, no one’s seriously injured.”

After defeating the group of adventurers who were attacking the townspeople, Ryoma and Hudom had illuminated the area with Light magic and administered first aid to the injured.

“Thank you for helping me out,” said Ryoma. “Not that I was watching the whole time, but you seemed like you really knew what you were doing.”

“I picked up a few things when I was training to be a knight, once upon a time,” Hudom answered.

Horses could be heard from a distance.

“Is that them?” asked Hudom.

“I think so,” Ryoma said. “There are...three carriages.”

When the lit carriages came into view, the coachman of the frontmost carriage called out, “We’re constables! Is anyone hurt?!”

“Not too badly!” someone answered.

“Come on down!”

The people waved the carriages over with a great sense of relief. As soon as the carriages came to a halt, their passengers went to work.

“We received a report that there was a riot,” one of them said. “Are those the rioters piled up over there?”

“That’s right!” one of the people said. “Those two over there took care of them for us!”

“Understood. We will take the rioters into custody. Another carriage will be here soon—if anyone here requires medical attention, please get on board.” The constable turned to Ryoma. “You must be Ryoma.”

“Yes, I’m Ryoma Takebayashi.”

“I have a message from the security company. ‘Fires are starting less frequently, but many are injured. Requesting your aid at the hospital.’”

“Thank you for the message. I’ll head there straight away. I’ll leave you to take care of them,” Ryoma said.

Ryoma and Hudom headed to the hospital attached to the security headquarters.



Meanwhile, a horse-drawn wagon containing five men had made its way into the trash plant. The men produced pots of oil from the wagon and poured them into an opening in the floor, then all over the unprocessed trash piled next to it.

“That about covers it.”

“Just gotta light it up. Step back from the opening,” one of the men said. He waited until the other four had stepped away from the opening, then cast a fire spell at it. A small ball of fire materialized from his hand and lit the pile of trash on fire, then traveled into the opening in the floor. The fire spread quickly.

“Let’s get out of here?”

As the men turned to make a quick escape, they were stopped by roaring flames.

“Hey, what’s going on with these flames?”

“Th-That can’t be all from the oil, can it?”

“There must have been something flammable down there. Or the slime, or whatever’s down there. Some plant-based monsters have oil pockets.”

“Whatever,” said one of the men, who began climbing into the wagon. “We did our job. Let’s get out of here. People will be here soon, and it’d be pretty stupid to get caught in the fire we started—” He froze. He’d spotted a

translucent tentacle out of the corner of his eye.

The tentacle was as thick as a log. At once, it reared up almost to the ceiling and twisted like a snake readying itself to strike. In the next moment, it carved away the burning part of the trash pile.

“Get away from the wagon!”

The tentacle attacked the men. They just managed to dodge a direct hit, but trash of all sizes flew out of the tentacle, pelting the men. The wagon took the whole force of the enormous tentacle and cracked all over under the weight of the thing, its cover and framework nearly demolished.

The two horses tied to the wagon were the most surprised by the sound and impact. The horses, who’d shown no sign of panic with the fire, were now deeply upset.

One of the men reached out to catch the reins as the horses darted to the exit, but before he could, another tentacle wrapped around his legs and began dragging him to the burning opening in the floor.

“Let go!” the man shouted. “Dammit, let go!”

The man drew his knife, desperately trying to hack off the tentacle. But the blade made no incision in the tentacle, only slipping this way and that along the surface.

“How is the knife not going in?!”

Soon, the man’s feet had arrived at the opening. His shoes, clothes, and then body caught on fire. He writhed around, screaming, begging for help.

“We don’t have time for you!” one of the other four shouted back. “Just die, already!”

The men had no bond or sense of camaraderie. They just happened to be assigned to the same job.

“How many of these big-ass slimes are there?! They’re coming out of every opening. We’re surrounded! You see a way out?!”

“Nothing this way! If you can’t cut it, can you burn it with magic?!”

“No good! It just charred the surface before it regenerated!”

“No matter how big it is, if it’s a slime, we just have to take out its core! Look for the core!”

The four began searching for the slime’s core, but all they could see was each other, the demolished wagon, and the tentacles that encircled them.

“If we can’t see the core, it’s gotta be down there still!”

“Dammit, it’s getting even bigger... The thing’s like a wall... Don’t tell me it’s all one big slime!”

“How big do you think the thing is?!”

“Yeah, it’s big, but... Physical Enhancement!” One of the intruders cast a spell to boost his physical attributes and made a running start. He leapt from the wagon and over the tentacles. His leap was high enough to clear an average fence between houses, but then a new tentacle emerged from the one he’d hoped to clear. The tentacle held the man up in the air, refusing to let him down, and began pulling him into itself. “L-Let gooo!” the man shouted.

“Slime or not, it’s trained to— Ugh!” A dwarven man, who had forsaken the idea of jumping over the tentacles, suddenly fell to his knees.

“Hey?!”

“What now?!”

“My head...suddenly...”

“Tsk! We don’t have time for a headache!”

“All of a sudden?! Poison?!”

“When would we have been— Ugh!” The man on the ground fell unconscious.

“Dammit! What is this monster?! I was gonna grit through the filth and the stench, but this wasn’t part of the deal!”

“Get a hold of yourself!”

“Shut up!”

Driven mad by the situation with no escape, the man began throwing pieces

of the destroyed wagon: wheel, hinges, lumber... Everything was either bounced back by the tentacle or taken in by it, dealing absolutely no damage. The only effect this produced, it seemed, was to help the slime identify the man as a pesky enemy.

“I get this job done, and I’m back in the game! I’ll kill anything—slime, security, *whatever*—that gets in my way! I’m not going to—”

A flame roared up at the man, swallowing him. He was dead before he could utter another sound. Most likely, even he wouldn’t have known what had happened.

Another one of the intruders who had tried to calm down the first had just barely dodged the flame itself. His mind was going numb, however, from the rapid deoxidation of the air. “Fire...? No, a burning wind,” he said. “No wonder there wasn’t much else guarding this place... I should have tried leaving the country. At least then, I would have had a hope of—” He lost consciousness, the last of the intruders to fall.

Now that the plant was quiet again, the tentacles began swallowing everything in sight, fire and all. Once all the danger had been eliminated, the tentacles slithered back into the opening, leaving behind a completely clean floor with only a hint of burning flesh in the air.

Chapter 7, Episode 50: Battles Fought in the Hospital

As the sun began to break over the horizon, Ryoma came rushing into the hospital grounds and found them overflowing with people. An endless line of carriages led out the gate, constantly moving and depositing the injured. The doctors who lived in the city had evacuated here, assessing the incoming patients for the severity of their injuries.

Ryoma spotted a familiar face among them. “Hector!” Ryoma called. “I’m here to help!”

“Get prepped and head into the exam room! Doctor Maflal’s there!” Hector said.

“Got it!” said Ryoma. “Hudom, pass on what we talked about to Hughes and the others. Please help them there the best you can!”

“On it!”

As directed, Ryoma went into the hospital. He headed towards the locker room, passing through the lobby and hallways crowded with the injured people of Gimul, bearing through their pain with gritted teeth. Staff and volunteers nearly had to shout directions at each other over the endless influx of patients. Ryoma hastened to join in as quickly as possible.

“Aaaargh!”

“Hold him down!”

“We can’t stem the bleeding!”

“Healing magic! Stat!”

Ryoma, now wearing sterile scrubs and a lab coat, walked into the ward where they were treating the worst of the worst. Doctors’ orders boomed through the ward, accompanied by agonized screams; the floors were gruesomely smeared with bloody footprints.

“Ryoma! Over here!” Maflal called from one of the exam rooms. “The next

patient will be in here soon. Administer appropriate healing magic. I'll direct you on the application. There are just so many patients—I'm counting on your help."

"Understood," Ryoma said.

In a matter of seconds, a bloodied, unconscious man was brought into the room on a stretcher as a man called out behind him, "C'mon, boss! They're gonna treat you! You're almost there! Hang in there, boss!"

A deep cut crossed his upper left arm, and an arrow—broken off to make transporting him easier—was stuck in his right thigh.

Maflal and Ryoma quickly assessed the patient and moved to treat him.

"Wait a minute!" The man who'd called after the patient earlier now clung to the door of the ward, being held off by hospital staff. He was an utter wreck. "Let me through!" he cried.

"We can't let you in here!" one of the staff replied.

"Why's there a kid here?!" he persisted, pointing at Ryoma. "Don't tell me the kid's gonna treat my boss! I know you got other patients too! But at least have the *real* doctor take care of him! Please!"

"Don't pay him any mind, Ryoma. I'll take care of it. Start with the right leg, please," Maflal said.

"Yes, Doctor." Ryoma reached for the instruments needed to treat the patient.

The man at the door began thrashing against the staff. "Wait!"

"Calm down," Maflal commanded. "We treat every patient to the best of our abilities. He is no exception."

"Then why won't *you* treat him?!"

"Now, I need to stop you from interrupting his treatment."

"Stop that kid, then!"

"Right thigh is treated," Ryoma said. "Moving on to the left arm."



“Treated?!” the man shouted again, outraged by the presumptuous declaration. Then, he saw the arrow lying by his boss and no sign of the wound left on the patient’s thigh. Once Ryoma had moved around the stretcher, the man had full view of him healing the deep gash on his boss’s left arm, right before his eyes. All the hospital staff in the room and even the distraught man, medically untrained though he was, could see how unbelievably fast Ryoma operated. Now he almost collapsed onto the ground from relief, and he had to be caught by additional employees who had rushed onto the scene to help with the irate man.

“Did you calm down a little?” Maflal asked kindly and with authority.

“Wh-Who is he?” he asked.

“A boy I’ve been mentoring,” Maflal answered. “Are you a craftsman?”

“I’m his apprentice. Carpentry,” the man said.

“He is still in training,” Maflal said, “but brilliant with healing magic. He’s probably the best at healing injuries out of all of my residents. I understand your concern for his age. I assure you, we are treating your mentor in the best way we can.”

The carpenter’s apprentice blinked his teary eyes a few times before pleading, “Thank you! And...I’m sorry. I saw him bleeding really badly, and I lost my cool. I’m really sorry! I can see he’s in good hands now.”

“Left arm treated,” Ryoma announced. He went on to cast a spell to heal the patient’s physical energy as he confirmed the dose of fast-acting hematinic prepared by his station. By this time, Maflal had returned to treating patients too.

Even after the carpenter’s apprentice had been escorted away from the ward by hospital staff, triage after grueling triage awaited the doctors. Still, Ryoma had calmly and swiftly given the carpenter treatment through the interruption, and Maflal had stood up to the man while still taking his concerns to heart. Amidst the tension in the building, the staff, patients, and their families had felt a sliver of reassurance watching the two doctors in action.

Ryoma and Maflal continued treating patients until they lost count of how many they'd seen. Now, while there was still an influx of patients, the situation at the hospital had calmed down somewhat.

"Excuse me," a doctor called. "Doctor Maflal, Doctor Ryoma—why don't you take lunch while we have a little lull?"

"Time flies, doesn't it?" Maflal said. "Thank you. Let's go, Ryoma."

"Yes. Thank you for holding down the fort for us," Ryoma said to the doctor who had come to replace them.

Maflal and Ryoma went to the table in the break room of the hospital, only to find the other residents congregated there.

"Hello," Ryoma greeted them.

"Are you all on lunch too?" Maflal asked.

"Yes, sir..." Hector said, more gloomy than usual.

"The other doctors gave us first break," Clarissa added.

Tint was chowing down his lunch while Isabella was working through hers with meticulous table manners, although her ruffled hair and the sweat on her face indicated her exhaustion.

Maflal took a sandwich from the serving platter. "Good thing everyone's here. I know we're on break, but let's share any information we have now. Especially if there are any spots that may be low on manpower or supplies, we should address that sooner than later."

The residents shared a look before Isabella spoke. "I'll go first. While there are many patients awaiting treatment, the influx has slowed down. Also, only a small percentage of them are severely injured. I've been told that most of them are not in life-threatening condition by any measure. We haven't gotten around to treating them, but we've been handling the traffic of the severely injured so far, with the help of the evacuated doctors who work at the hospitals and clinics throughout the city. If anything, we need more people and supplies to deal with the mildly injured. Wouldn't you say, Clarissa?"

"Yes... The external doctors have offered to help us with them too, and

treating them is not an issue in itself. Only, there's a long queue, and everyone's on edge because of what's happening to the city. We pretty frequently have some outbursts from those who have been waiting too long. We have enough supplies too. The cleaner slimes launder the bandages and sheets as we use them. We also boil surgical equipment to sterilize it, but the whole process is quick and easy enough."

"Plenty of medicine as well..." Hector said. "In fact, we have so much stock that the other pharmacists asked me how we managed it. Ryoma made plenty of herbs with his magic and weed slimes, and once we verified that we could use what the medicine slimes secrete, we stockpiled a lot of batches. Barring some catastrophe, we're not running out."

"I'm more concerned with the supplies available at the shelters. There should be more evacuated medical personnel there performing treatment," Tint said.

Ryoma recalled what he had seen during his firefighting. "I'm not sure if it will come to this, but I'm concerned that this situation is going to drag out. The constabulary should have been told this as well, but several attackers who've tried to sabotage the firefighters have confessed that they were ordered to *injure* as many people as possible. That they weren't ordered to kill anyone, and had no intention to." This information drew shocked looks from the other five. "I don't mean just two or three of them either. But I'm not taking their word for it entirely, since it could just be an excuse they came up with or were ordered to give once they were caught."

"But you don't have enough reason to write it off either."

"No. If their confessions are to be believed, those orders came from the very person who orchestrated this attack. Whoever they are, I somehow doubt they're doing this out of concern for human life. *Not* killing gives them a better advantage... I think they're trying to wear out the manpower and supplies required for rescues and treatment."

The look in the doctors' eyes grew severe. As professionals who had dedicated their lives to saving others, they burned with indignation. Tint's face had even turned bright red, visibly outraged by a foe he could not yet put a name or face to.

“It won’t be a problem if I’m just overthinking this, but I can’t shake the feeling,” Ryoma said.

“Planning for all possible outcomes is crucial to practicing medicine too. Take our stockpile, for example. If we hadn’t planned for something like this, we would be struggling to come up with those supplies now,” Maflal said. “Let’s see how many supplies and injured are at each shelter. We can share some of our stock with locations that need it, and I’ll ask again if the shelters can treat the mildly injured. Not to present it as a trade-off, but the supplies should make it easier on them to take in those patients. That should allow them to be treated more quickly than insisting they be treated here.”

As Maflal made the suggestion, he looked to each of the others, asking with his eyes if anyone had any counter arguments. None were made. “I’ll reach out to them, then. I’ll be back as soon as I can, but don’t wait for me to keep treating our patients.” He took another sandwich for the road and swiftly strode out of the break room.

“I appreciate the speedy reaction, but has Doctor Maflal gotten any rest...?”

“Don’t worry about him, Ryoma. He has far more experience than we do, and this is something that has to be done. Sounds like you were doing great out there.”

“Thanks to you—and these guys.” With a smile, Ryoma stroked the heal slime on his right shoulder. “It’s humbling to work alongside real medical professionals.”

There were a few factors that allowed Ryoma to participate in treating the severely injured: healing magic and magical potions with effects that were unimaginable by Earth standards; a short-term tutelage under Doctor Maflal that had focused on trauma care; and, most of all, the use of Slime Vision, which allowed him to precisely examine wounds.

“With or without the help of any slime, you should be proud of yourself, Ryoma!”

“The other doctors were surprised at how adept you are at your age.”

“You’re definitely better than me at incisions and extractions... Do you have

any tips for me?”

“Are you feeling all right, Ryoma? I know you focus only on the patient’s affected area to lessen the strain on you, but it still can’t be easy.”

“Thank you. I’m just doing what I can with the tools I have. As for incisions and extractions... I know how to use a blade, and I’m not sure if I should be comparing the two, but I’ve had a lot of practice on wild game I’ve caught in the woods. And I’m feeling okay. I can’t say I’m not tired, but I used to be in this state semifrequently. If I have to, I can pull two or three all-nighters in a row, and I have magic recovery potions. Worse comes to worst, I just need to cast healing magic on myself to keep going as much as I need.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to go that far... Speaking of—Ryoma, you’ve been out since we called on you, right? You ran into me out front.”

“Yes. I’ve been firefighting and dealing with saboteurs.”

“For how long?”

“Since right after the first explosion last night.”

“Were you sleeping when it started?”

“I’ve been taking power naps,” Ryoma simply said, and reached for another sandwich.

Once the four doctors realized Ryoma wasn’t kidding, they shared a look.

He’ll be out cold before we know it, they thought.

The doctors gently explained to Ryoma that he shouldn’t burn himself out, despite the dire situation in the city, all the while silently resolving to lead Ryoma by example. On top of their concern for Ryoma, they considered him a fellow apprentice to Doctor Maflal. They couldn’t let him work himself to the bone to treat these patients on his own.

Ryoma was reassured by their kindness when their brief reprieve came to an end.

“Excuse me! Many of the constables are injured and inbound! Please prepare for their arrival!”

“Got it!”

Another long battle at the hospital was about to begin.

Chapter 7, Episode 51: Home for a Moment

The news had arrived by the next morning.

“A break?” Ryoma asked.

“Yes,” Lilian the maid answered. “We’ve made more arrests and now control more of their base of operations. No fires or attacks have happened since last night. At this point, some of the city residents pose a bigger threat than our enemy.”

“Yes, I’ve heard some word about that. They’ve turned to rioting.”

“They claim to be vigilantes taking up arms to protect the city and their families... In actuality, they are just charging up to anyone they deem enemies and assaulting them with their overwhelming numbers. Some are even looting from stores and houses.”

“More people have been injured and sent to the hospital because of them. Adventurers who, after helping with evacuation or firefighting, were accused of sabotage anyway... We’d anticipated the possibility of a riot, but what caused this one?”

“The constabulary hasn’t gotten around to interrogating those they’ve arrested yet. However, some of the rioters, especially the more aggressive ones, were most likely under a Suggestion spell. The riots are almost certainly orchestrated by someone else.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Ryoma said, exasperated. “What a *lovely* parting gift. Can we assume our main enemies have mostly been dealt with?”

“Mostly, yes. We should still remain alert for any remnants. That being said, the Duke has requested your assistance in dealing with the aftermath, rather than the lingering threat at hand. Clearing out the wreckage of burnt properties and building temporary housing for the evacuees, for example. To that end, while you can, you need to properly rest.”

That’s why she’s talking to me alone in this warehouse, Ryoma understood.

Lilian took his silence for hesitation and stared him down, determined. “Whether or not it’s healthy for our city to rely on one individual so much, the reality is that we could really use your and your slimes’ help all over the city. That’s why we need to rest now, so you’ll be at your full strength when we need you the most. You’ve barely slept in three days from the firefighting and administering medical treatments. And you’ve been repeatedly taking magical recovery potions. They may not have any immediate side effects, but they are definitely not good for you long-term. Combat or healing, every spellcaster learns to recover their magical energy primarily through rest.”

“I see. Then I’ll take you up on that and get some rest.”

“What?”

“What’s the matter? You seem so surprised.”

“I am, if I’m being honest. I expected a little more...pushback.”

“How much of a workaholic do you think I am?”

“We all have faith in your character and abilities, but I don’t think you’ve earned our trust when it comes to taking rest when necessary.”

“I know cleaning up this ordeal won’t be done overnight. I intend to rest when I can.”

“Allow me to prepare you a room before you change your mind.”

“Oh, I’ll go back to my home in the mines. I’d be more comfortable there anyway, and it’s no time to waste any resources, let alone a whole room in the city, on me.”

“For you to rest, so it’s no waste. Besides, we still expect remnants in the city. We know you are a capable fighter, but I still hesitate to send you outside the city alone.”

Ryoma put on a reassuring smile to convince Lilian. “Don’t worry. Security at the city gates is stricter now, and I’ll be jumping home immediately with Space magic. Even if some remnants find their way to me, the mines are defended by slimes. They’d trip the alarm before they even reached the slimes. By the time they made it all the way into my home, I’d be out of there with another bout of

Space magic.”

“Of course, it would be no small feat to catch a fleeing Space spellcaster. I have faith that your defense systems are effective too. But—”

“Besides, I have a decent amount of crops and herbs I’ve experimentally grown at home, so I want to bring them in. I’ve been told the guilds and the city have a decent stockpile, but any extra wouldn’t hurt, would it?”

“I suppose not... While it hasn’t become a problem yet, we do have some concerns about food and medical supplies down the road. Some food stores and warehouses have been attacked, and restocking won’t be easy this time of the year.”

“Most of the crops at home are potatoes. Some vegetables. I haven’t taken a count or anything, but I could probably fill a warehouse or two in the warehouse district.”

“That much?”

“I’d been at it every day to practice my spellcasting and farming, and the goblins are a good source of labor. Farming has become more efficient since some of my scavenger slimes have evolved. If we weren’t in this situation, I’d love to tell you all about it... I do have plenty of food ready to mass-produce, once I can set the place up for it.”

“That would be of great help. Do you need any extra hands to transport all that food?”

“The slimes and goblins have it covered.”

“Are you saying that just so you can do some kind of work when no one is looking...?”

“No, I won’t! No, no. I’ll rest, I promise. I’ll even stay in bed while I share my senses with the goblins and have them carry it. They’ve multiplied to thirty-two, so it won’t take long at all.”

“I would think sharing your senses would make you even more tired... Fine. As you wish.”

“Thank you for understanding. I’ll let Doctor Maflal know, and I’ll take my

leave, as long as there are enough hands on deck,” Ryoma concluded.



Ryoma headed to the examination room and relayed this plan to Maflal.

“I see,” the doctor replied. “Gradually, we are starting to have a little downtime. Protecting and supporting patients postcare is an important job too. We’ll hold down the fort here, Ryoma. You can go where you’re needed.”

“Thank you,” Ryoma said. “I’ll take my leave, then.”

Ryoma returned to Lilian who waited outside the room. “Doctor Maflal gave me the go-ahead, so I’ll head home. After loading the supplies into Dimension Home... I think I’ll return tomorrow morning.”

“That’s fine. Please rest as long as you need. If you *collapse*, it will severely affect the cleanup of the city, my duty as the duke’s employee, and...well, me.”

“When you put it like that, I do feel sorry. I’ll try my best,” Ryoma said.

The next moment, he heard a commotion behind him.

“Whoa!”

“Please, stay down!”

He found a man being carried on a stretcher. He must have just been treated in the neighboring examination room. He was swathed in bandages nearly from head to toe; there was less of him uncovered than covered. Despite his condition, the man was frantically trying to get off of the stretcher and out onto the streets.

Just as Ryoma stepped forward to stop the man, he heard Isabella’s voice. “Sleep Mist!” The Poison magic flew through the air. The next moment, the magically soporific mist had enveloped the man’s face, and he’d fallen like a puppet with its strings cut. Just before he collapsed, Isabella was there to catch him and effortlessly hand him off to the hospital staff.

“Phew...” She sighed.

“Spectacular work.”

“Oh, Ryoma. You were outside.”

“What was wrong with him?” Lilian asked.

Isabella gave a quick look around, then lowered her voice. “Apparently he witnessed a kidnapping.”

Ryoma’s and Lilian’s expressions darkened.

“Kidnapping?”

“That’s no joke.”

Isabella couldn’t contain her exasperation. “I don’t know much about it, but he was deliriously calling the child’s name all through treatment, so he must have known them. Should be painful to even stand, but...you saw him. As soon as he regained a sliver of consciousness from a healing spell... We contacted the constabulary, so they should be on it. Hopefully they’ll find the child safe.” Just as she said so, the next patient was carted in. “I have to attend to that.”

“Sorry to keep you,” Ryoma said. “Thank you for that information.”

Once Isabella returned to the examination room, Ryoma glanced in the direction where the sleeping man was taken. Lilian noticed.

“Then...I’ll be heading home,” Ryoma said.

“You’re going to search for the child,” Lilian stated.

Just for a moment, Ryoma’s smile unmistakably froze. “How did you know?”



“This is why we can’t trust you to rest on your own. Kidnapping is a serious business, but the constabulary will be on it. And you won’t find the child by searching the city blindly. Unless you have any clue as to the identity of the kidnapper.”

“Just a guess, but yes.”

“Really...? Of course, I know you wouldn’t lie about something like this.”

“I’ve been gathering information on the city. Places with less traffic. Signs of shady business. It’s only a hunch, really. Not enough reason to bother the constabulary.”

“So I just thought I’d make a *pit stop*,” Ryoma said. “If there’s nothing amiss, I’ll go straight home. I know full well that my job isn’t to investigate crime.” Ryoma smiled weakly. As apologetic as he was, he was determined.

Lilian’s face soured. They stood in silence for a few seconds before she let out a long sigh. “Please, at least take a few people who can fight. And promise that regardless of whether or not something is amiss, you will only verify your hunch and not pursue the matter further.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s admirable to jump into action. With a proper skill set, you’re invaluable. Just... If you could take care of yourself a little bit better.”

“I know I always make you and the others concerned for me... I know. Why don’t we hold a little gathering after all the dust has settled? A little R and R,” Ryoma said, as if suddenly inspired. “Well, that’d be more work for the maids, I suppose...”

“We have three days left in the year, so a *small* gathering after things have calmed down shouldn’t be a problem. Once everyone isn’t as busy, Hughes or someone else will suggest it, anyway. The constables should be rewarded for their hard work too.”

“Really? I’ll be looking forward to it. Please tell anyone who asks I’ll see them tomorrow.”

“Understood. We’ll be awaiting your return.”

Unlike his earlier attempt at departure, Ryoma left the building naturally but quickly.

Lilian watched Ryoma leave, then returned to her duties.

Chapter 7, Episode 52: Detour!

Meanwhile, in a room created in secret within the city limits of Gimul, a man's voice boomed, "Are you out of your mind?! Snatching a damn kid! Do you *want* them to come after us?!"

"Didn't have a choice. Constables and adventurers are around every corner, and familiars are flying all over the sky like they're keeping watch. If we'd bolted from the kid like a pack of rats, we'd be in the slammer by now."

"You thought it'd be *less* suspicious to beat up the adult who saw the kid find you and bring the kid here? What's the point of stealing a carriage to keep a low profile when you pull crap like this?!"

"What else were we supposed to do? Just get caught?"

The pair of men glowered at each other in the windowless, claustrophobic room.

"Knock off the bickering, both of you," a third man answered.

"Boss, but he's—"

"You're not wrong. But remember why we're crammed into this hole."

"To hide from those in the city and the new recruits."

"That's right," the boss said. "Can't trust those newbies. We keep blindly following them, and we'll be *disposed of* once they have no use for us. It goes without saying what will happen if we're arrested. If *he* had gotten busted and they traced him here, we would have been toast. Am I wrong?"

"Well... No."

"There's no point in infighting now. Get over it." The boss, a bearded man, turned to the kidnapper. "And you. You did almost botch the whole thing. Keep that in mind. I don't give third chances."

"Yessir..."

The remainder of the crew—another ten men who'd been watching the interaction—could finally take a breath. They were all packed into a space that was more like a hallway than a proper room; any of them could've reached out and touched both walls. They had no reprieve from arguments like this one.

"Boss, what do we do with the kid? We put him in the crapper for the time being..."

"It's not like we can let him walk. Even a kid can get us some coin if we can sell him off. Since you had the bright idea of nabbing him, you take care of him until the dust settles. Don't let him get away, no matter what. If the kid tries to run or starts making too much of a fuss, whack him. We need cash to get away, but staying hidden is much more important than some extra pocket change," the boss ordered.

"Yessir," the kidnapper answered.

"As long as you weren't followed." The boss turned to another man in the room. "How's it look outside?"

"My familiar's on patrol, but nothing's been..." He trailed off, prompting all eyes in the room to focus on him.

"What is it?" the boss asked.

"Ryoma Takebayashi is right there," he replied. "Just beyond the fence."

"What?!" exclaimed one of the other eleven.

"I thought your familiar was on patrol!" shouted another.

"Quiet!" The boss returned his attention to the watchman. "Details. Is he hunting us down?"

"I...don't think so. He's just passing by, I believe."

"Passing by?"

"Looks like he's cleaning the storm drains. He's unarmed. Only carrying cleaning equipment."

The men shared a look and scoffed.

"Scared the crap out of me," one of them remarked.

“You said it. What are the odds?”

Amidst the laughing of his men, their boss stood stone-faced, beads of sweat beginning to form on his face. “Everyone grab your gear. The kid too.”

“Boss?”

“Now!”

“Wh-What’s the matter, all of a sudden?!”

“Why would he be cleaning a ditch right now?! Dammit, I can’t stop the chills. This is never good. We’re getting out of here!”

“But where are we going?”

“Anywhere! Anywhere’s better than staying here—”

The boss stopped short. Sewage had begun to seep out from under the door to the bathroom at the end of the tiny room, much to the dismay and disgust of the men.

“What’s that smell?!”

“The crapper’s overflowing...”

“Move!” The boss pushed past them, reaching for the bathroom door. It didn’t budge. “Snap to it! We’re being attacked!” he shouted.

“Whoa!”

“Wh-What’s that?!”

“An earthquake!”

A grinding sound, followed by a sudden quake, made the men cry out in confusion, drowning out their boss’s command. The next moment, a massive crack ran through the wall. Sand sprayed in through the crack and ravaged the room. The sudden sandstorm, however, passed after mere seconds. Then the sensation of sand pelting at their faces was replaced by a breeze of fresh air.

“B-Boss!” one of the men called.

“Yeah, I can see it too... Seen this magic a few times before, and it’s still just as ridiculous.”

As the breeze swept away the dust, the men found themselves standing amidst the rubble that had once been their hideout. In front of them stood Ryoma, the one who turned their hideout to dust, with a crowd of armed adults behind him. Farther behind them, the boy they had kidnapped was being hurried away.

Drawing their daggers, the criminals immediately prepared for battle. One of them bravely charged at Ryoma, either to attack him directly or to take him hostage. Either way, he didn't accomplish his objective.

"Don't go charging in like—" the boss called, a moment too late.

A sphere the size of a ping-pong ball flew into the attacker's arm, sending the dagger into the air. Before the blade hit the ground, three additional spheres simultaneously struck the man in the temple and jaw from either side and his knee from behind. He let out a yelp and collapsed into the puddle of sewage that had formed at his feet.

"Way to die for nothing," the boss grumbled.

"I haven't killed him," Ryoma said. The four mysterious balls were bouncing by his side.

They were a new species of slime, evolved from the latex slime that could be used to manufacture products like the anti-slip coatings. These rubber slimes could change their own properties just as rubber could change its properties when exposed to sulfur or carbon. Because of this, Ryoma had been able to adjust the slimes' hardness and elasticity to turn them into bouncing balls. While they closely resembled their toy counterparts on Earth, they could do some damage by striking enemies at high speeds, especially with how much mass they contained.

For a skillful martial artist like Ryoma, these rubber balls were effective enough to incapacitate his foes. With enough force, an effective strike could even deal damage through an armor helmet—and an accurate enough strike could knock out an opponent in one shot. Still, the relatively less destructive rubber balls were well suited for fighting in the city. Even if a stray rubber ball hit a passerby, they weren't likely to suffer severe injuries. With all that in mind, Ryoma had decided to use the rubber balls in martial arts training.

Of course, he had no obligation or reason to explain any part of it to the kidnappers.

With his head held high, Ryoma called out to them, “Drop your weapons and surrender. I won’t say it again.”

“Heh... You’re too soft,” the boss said. “If we’re arrested, we’re done for anyway. Scatter!” he commanded, and his gang ran in all directions other than Ryoma’s. Ryoma’s group was all behind him, leaving their escape routes apparently unguarded. While the kidnappers weren’t optimistic enough to believe they weren’t surrounded, they ran as fast as they could, each with the slim hope that at least they might make it through.

Meanwhile, their boss held his dagger waist-high as energy enveloped him. He had no intention of accepting Ryoma’s suggestion, nor of making a run for it. He would risk his life to face Ryoma head-on...or rather, he *would have*, if he’d been able to move his legs. Turning his gaze to the ground, he found several blobs of water, each the shape of a human hand, extending from the murky puddle to restrain his feet.

With no other choice, he tore his feet out of their watery grasp. He only wanted to leave one scratch on Ryoma—to buy just a fraction of a second for his men. Even though he knew with great pain that he had no chance of winning, he had to make a stand. With foolish resolve, he enhanced his body as much as possible as he marched towards Ryoma, the end of his blade pointed at the boy.

More liquid hands grabbed at him; he tore them away. The grip of these watery appendages was weak, but every time the boss tore through one, it reshaped itself in an instant. Soon, the fluid hands covered his entire body, and his feet were caught in the muck. Try as he might, there was no escape.

The water had taken hold of the other men too, who fought with all of their might against the murky hands.

“Dammit!”

“Get off me!”

It was to no avail. Before they knew it, their hideout had turned into a

bubbling, sewage-filled swamp which expanded before their eyes.

Grotty and reeking, the countless hands extending from the quagmire looked like dark spirits come to drag the criminals to the underworld. Some of the kidnappers were trapped a mere ten meters away from the clean road, and the short distance between them and safe ground seemed like a vast torrent they couldn't dream of crossing. Despite their efforts to break free, the kidnappers fell one by one into the swamp.

"You monster," their boss snarled, the last one to be subdued.

Before long, everyone had sunk into the murky water, leaving Ryoma and his legion of watery arms.



"They put up more of a fight than I would've thought," I said, and turned to the group that had gathered around me after I'd cast my first spell.

"Everyone...what are you doing?" Most of them had put some distance between themselves and me. "Hudom?" I asked.

"They're keeping away from your spell," he explained. "I know how accurate you are with it, but those who don't probably think that they'll be dragged down if they get too close. And those muddy hands? It's terrifying. And it reeks. To be honest, if I wasn't supposed to be your bodyguard, I'd be over there with them."

"Oh, I see. Maybe because I was focused on incapacitating them—I wasn't trying to make it look ominous or anything," I said.

"In any case, it's all over," Hudom said. "And you did *apprehend* them, right? From here, it looked like they just sank into the sewage."

That, at least, I had taken care of. "They are getting air down there. I could cover their mouths and noses completely if needed, but they're just immobilized right now."

"Then let's wrap this up, quick." Hudom turned to the crowd. "We're all clear!"

Once Hudom had called out to them, those who'd been waiting at a distance

came running up to us.

“I’ll start receding the water until they appear,” I explained.

“Got it,” one of the constables on the scene answered. “Phew. It’s pungent over here...”

“It is all sewage and muck,” I said. “How is the little boy? I did make sure he was alive, but...”

“He’s fine. Tied up, but he wasn’t hurt. Sent him to the hospital already.”

“Good.”

“Then I’ll go join them,” he said, and ran up to the swamp where the kidnappers were being held.

All that was left to do was to slowly return the sewage into the drainage system so the constable could take the kidnappers into custody.

“Are you all right?” one of the delinquent adventurers on the scene asked me.

“Looking a little wobbly there,” said another.

“I’m fine. Now that it’s over, I’ve let myself relax a bit. Thanks for the help,” I said.

“We don’t deserve any thanks.”

“Yeah, we haven’t done anything.”

They laughed good-naturedly. They had helped me track down the kidnappers too. It was nice that I had people on my side who were familiar with the sewage system, since that’s how I had verified my suspicions as to where their hideaway was, utilizing the two slimes that ate sewage and sludge.

I had to admit, though, the effort had worn on me a little bit. Good thing that our prep work had narrowed down their possible hideouts, and that I had actually found the right one.

“Fascinating how they turned a rental warehouse into a hideout. Looks like they even built a hidden room between the walls,” Hudom said.

“They must have spent a long time on this,” I said. “Although I can’t tell how long. Since they modified the warehouse like this, I suspect the owner of the

warehouse or someone who works for them was involved in this... I'll leave that to the constables, though."

By now, the kidnappers had all been apprehended and were being pushed into wagons designed for transporting those in custody.

"I'll get going," I told the chief constable on the scene. "If the owner of the warehouse comes out to claim damages or reimbursements, please let me and the security company know. While it was an emergency, I know my methods were...flashy."

"I'll make sure my supervisor knows," he answered. "And...thank you for your help in apprehending those kidnappers." He saluted me.

For whatever reason, the other constables, the adventurers, and even Hudom joined in. So I returned a salute to them and then cast a Space magic spell.

I walked out of the city through the north gate, and with another bout of Space magic, I was home.

Chapter 7, Episode 53: Self-Awareness and Making Changes

Once he'd returned from Gimul, Ryoma called his goblins to a meeting and gave them directions as he took a snack.

"Got it?" he asked the goblins.

"Gob!" they answered.

Then Ryoma went straight to bed and tried to get some rest... But he couldn't sleep. Through firefighting, rescuing, healing, and tracking down kidnappers, Ryoma had run all over the city casting all sorts of magic all day. Having synced his senses with his slimes frequently, he was physically and mentally exhausted.

But his eyelids did not grow heavy—all sorts of thoughts still whirled in his mind. Even when he occasionally dozed off, he was soon awake again.

I can't sleep.

Ryoma stood from his bed. He grabbed a cup and a small bag from his nightstand, then scooped a spoonful of brown powder from the bag and into the cup. He boiled some water with magic and poured it in.

"Phew... Good thing I had this ready."

This was an herbal concoction. It had been a favorite of Ryoma's since his time on Earth. It was a blend of roasted dandelion root, wormwood, ginkgo leaves, and a few other plants. He had managed to find the ingredients necessary to recreate it.

I always used to... Uh-oh. I've been doing this a lot lately.

Ryoma caught himself thinking of his previous life more and more frequently of late. It didn't happen every day, but whenever he had a sleepless night like this, he thought about his life on Earth. Everyone reminisced about their past, though, and Ryoma attributed the cause of his wandering mind to his exhaustion. This usually didn't bother him, but today was a little different.

“Three days before the end of the year, you might find clarity when you’re alone in the abandoned mine,” Serelipta had once told him.

“Is this what he meant?” Ryoma mused aloud. The idea only gave him more questions. What clarity might he find about his past? What was unclear to him? Why? Was he thinking of the past in search of some clarity, or did he need clarity about something that had happened in the past? His thoughts were all over the place, and his tiredness was no help.

Ryoma sat on the bed, sipped on his herbal tea, and contemplated. *Why did Serelipta tell me that, anyway...? He even went to the trouble of making sure the other gods couldn’t hear him tell me.* Knowing Serelipta’s free-spirited nature, Ryoma knew one thing for sure: the answer wasn’t simple. Still, he felt a bizarre sense of trust in Serelipta—he somehow knew that the mischievous god wouldn’t lie to him about something like this. As Ryoma continued to try and wrangle his wandering mind, he suddenly laughed. *I can’t figure it out! he thought. But that’s okay. Even though I’m thinking about the past, I know it’s in the past. There’s no doubt that I’m happy with my life right now. I have food, shelter, and more than enough money to get by, with plenty of income from adventuring and my businesses in the city. Not only do I have a cushy life in that way, I feel fulfilled about my slime projects. I’ve come to know a lot of people, and the vast majority of them are very nice. How could I not be happy?*

Even as he sipped another mouthful of herbal tea, he remembered how he had gathered the ginkgo leaves with the young adventurer Beck. On the shelf by his bed, he could see the stone he had been given by Nikki, the boy he had come to know during his trip to Fatoma.

Ryoma’s room held plenty of other tokens that reminded him of the connections he had made with others. Back in the forest of Gana, Ryoma had still had plenty of *things*, but they had all been made by him. He had been self-sufficient—in an isolated loop of existence.

“Wait, that makes me sound like some loner,” he said. “I still had my slimes back then, so I wasn’t exactly alone... Maybe I shouldn’t equate slimes to human company, though. That makes me sound like even more of a pathetic loner.”

Having lived alone for the majority of his adult life on Earth, Ryoma had formed a habit of talking to himself. Now, perhaps aided by his sleeplessness, he seemed giddier than usual about it.

I never thought I could have a life like this... I thought things like this only happened in light novels, or literal dreams... Is this what Serelipta meant? He considered. Did he need clarity about how he appreciated his current life? *That could make sense. If I were dreaming, and if I could go back to Earth by waking up...I wouldn't want to wake up.*

Ryoma recalled how he had first met Gain and the other gods. When they had explained how he had died on Earth, Ryoma hadn't cared if he was dreaming or not. That's how little attachment he'd had to his life on Earth, and his willingness to accept his new life in this new world had ultimately led him to where he was today.

There was no hope or future on Earth. Like I was dropped into the middle of the ocean where I'd drown if I stopped swimming. I guess it always could have been worse, but I was terrified of any little thing going wrong. Every time Ryoma had watched the news or seen articles online about a new criminal, he couldn't help but feel like he would be featured on them one day. Not that he would have defended those criminals, but Ryoma had been saddened by the comments against the criminals, almost as if they had been personal attacks on himself.

Before he'd known it, particular thoughts had begun lurking in the back of his mind: wouldn't it be easier if his life just ended? While he wouldn't have chosen to take his own life, he'd always felt like the world would've been better off the quicker he was gone from it...

Grinding on my body and mind just to preserve my life, for whatever it was worth...

Now, Ryoma remembered what Orest, the young owner of a slave-trading company, had told him. "You seemed like a man who finally grasped a treasure you've longed for for years. Someone like that wouldn't want to lose their treasure again. I felt like, subconsciously, you are trying to be the good boy who obediently listens to everything adults tell him... You seem very happy but very

confined.”

Ryoma chuckled to himself. “He hit it right on the mark... I get it now. When life was smooth sailing, surrounded by kind people, I’d felt like I had really been reborn from the inside out—but my mind hadn’t really changed at all.”

Although anyone who overheard him might’ve thought the sentiment was pessimistic, Ryoma could not have been more at peace. At last, he had a genuine smile on his face.

By the time he’d finished his herbal tea, the tornado of thoughts had gone away. He turned to finally return to his bed and the promise of blissful sleep...when a stone slime hidden along the perimeter of his home notified Ryoma of a group coming towards him.

“Clarity, huh... Now I get it. I’m still going to make everyone worry about me, though.” Even as he said so, Ryoma had a smile on his face. He reached for the katana by his bed. Although his physical condition was far from perfect, he was glowing with energy more powerful than he had ever felt before.



Clouds obscured the moon and the stars; no light shone on the snow that piled on the path between the mines and the city of Gimul. A dark force, thirty-two in all, was approaching the remote home. Thirty of them carried boxes on their backs as they marched on warily. The other two were clad in thick armor and carried zweihanders on their backs, but they walked through the woods as if they had no weight on them at all.

Just as the conspicuous group reached the foot of the mountain, a voice began to echo around them. “Uh... Testing, testing. Can you hear me? This is Ryoma Takebayashi. Uh... To those coming my way through the forest now... You’re here to kill me, right? I’m not going anywhere, so hurry it up already. I’m right here.” Then a series of lights illuminated part of the abandoned mine, revealing the entrance where the fruits of the mine had once been stored to await transfer. Now torches encircled the area to show Ryoma standing in the middle of it.

“Turn them on!” one of the intruders calmly ordered. All of the men, clad in black, reached for the boxes on their backs and activated their magical items.

“There’s no sense in hiding—” Ryoma’s announcement was cut short as magical energy pulsed from the boxes and canceled out the Wind magic that was delivering Ryoma’s voice to them.

The silence in the forest was short-lived, as another command came from one of the intruders. “Hurry!”

Part of the group hurried ahead, resolved to sacrifice themselves to activate any traps along the way, just to deliver the others to their target as quickly as possible. But nothing came of their sacrificial charge—the entire group soon came face-to-face with Ryoma without encountering any booby traps or deterrents whatsoever. Ryoma hadn’t moved a step since he showed himself to them, still standing in the center of a circular patch of neatly trimmed lawn where the snow had been melted off of. This put the intruders on guard even more.

“Welcome,” Ryoma said. “Well, not really. Just to make sure, won’t you surrender?”

“Ha! Don’t you understand what’s happening?” one of them countered.

“I always knew you’d be coming after me,” said Ryoma. “I was told to run if something like this happened...but I can’t afford to have you attack the city too. So I made the executive decision to take care of you here and now.” Ryoma’s declaration could have triggered an instant battle.

However, the armored pair heartily laughed. “Ha! Amusing, isn’t it, Brother?” one of them asked.

“Indeed, Brother. He wants a fair fight against us, does he?”

Drawing their swords—which were as long as they were tall—the pair marched forward. Some of the others moved to stop them. “Wait, this could be a trap.”

“Stay back,” one of the brothers said. “It is our job to deal with him.”

“Keep watch on our surroundings...and any stealthier tactics than this.”

“Just the two of you?” Ryoma asked.

“Apparently, you’ve caused a lot of headaches,” said one of the armored

warriors. “We’ve been told to wait until you’re spent from running around the city. To kill you at all cost.”

“Those behind us are mostly there to fend off any unwanted intrusions.”

“Went to a lot of trouble to take on a lone kid,” Ryoma said. “I’m assuming they’re stopping me from using magic too.”

“We scoffed at the idea at first,” the warrior said. “But now that we’re face-to-face... Brother?”

“I think this will be far more interesting than we’d thought, brother. Quite impressive that he stands his ground. Even more intriguing that he probably has the strength to back it up.”

Ryoma let out a sigh. “This would have been so much easier if you were the type to come charging at me carelessly, thinking I’d be an easy kill...”

“We’ve done our research,” one of the brothers said. “Surely you know why we are being thorough.”

“I have a few reasons in mind...but I’ve been too busy lately, so I’m not sure which thing you’re talking about. You’ve already shut off my magic, so are you talking about the time I beat up those delinquent adventurers? That can’t be enough... Wait, am I doing that trope where a character’s so powerful he doesn’t realize that he’s causing trouble?”

“Whatever *that* means, we wouldn’t be this careful if you’d only disciplined those punks.”

“The bandits in the forest of Gana,” the other man added.

“Were they your comrades?” Ryoma asked.

“Not exactly. We often walk in the wilderness to hide from prying eyes. Underground guilds share information on hidden pathways frequented by their members. According to our intel, a lot of bandits have vanished around the forest of Gana.”

“Knowing that you lived in the forest and cashed in on their bounty, it seems natural to assume that you were responsible for their downfall. Besides, with the kind of energy you’re exuding now, even an untrained eye could see how

you are ready to fight.”

The calm exchange belied the intensity of the moment. The men in black—who had both committed murder and come back from the brink of death themselves more times than they could count—couldn’t help but shudder at Ryoma’s aura. Otherwise, they would have tried to kill him already. They might have been given orders only to ward off intrusions, but there was no reason not to take an opening if one presented itself.

“Strange,” said one brother. “This child could not have been alive for more than a quarter of our lives, and he seems like nothing if not a seasoned warrior.”

“We’ve killed countless such warriors before, but I’ve never faced one as young as you who hasn’t cried for mercy by the time we’ve drawn our swords. Answer this before we kill you. Why face us alone? Do you not fear us? Fear death?”

“Well...I know it’s not the smartest decision,” Ryoma said. “I can’t help sticking my nose in, though. I’ve always messed up because of that. Made people mad. I’ve tried over and over again to curb this habit, but...here we are. Back in the forest, there was no sense in begging nature or a wild beast for mercy. And I *have* already died before...”

“Died?”

“What are you going on about?”

The brothers sound irritated, taking Ryoma’s answer for a joke, or at least a sign that he wasn’t going to engage in earnest conversation.

“Think of it as a metaphor,” Ryoma said. “I know what it’s like to live a life you think is worse than death...and now I feel fulfilled. If I died here and now, I’d have no regrets. I used to say that too, but for a different reason. Hey, death won’t be so bad if I can hang out with those gods afterwards.” Ryoma was smiling. “Of course, though, the main reason I’m not afraid is because I have no intention of dying. I like Gimul, and I’m not going to make people who care about me cry over me.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not an option. We have our mission, and we will

complete it. If you didn't want to sadden those people, you should have run."

"No. If he wanted to prevent us from attacking the city, this was the best choice."

Ryoma kept his smile. "You're still assuming you're going to win. I hate to tell you this, since you brought out all of those magical items to cut off my magic, but, well...I prefer swordplay to magic, if I'm being honest."

"Then show us what you can do with it. We are the Greatsword Brothers."

"No one has faced us and survived."

For the first time, the brothers set foot in the turfed arena. In the blink of an eye, they sped up unnaturally, suddenly flanking Ryoma from either side.

The battle to the death began without warning.

Chapter 7, Episode 54: Back in His Element

The clash of metal rang in the air; sparks flickered in the torchlight. *How is he alive...?* one of the men in black couldn't help but wonder. Just a few moments ago, he had thought Ryoma was as good as dead—that he'd have no chance of retaliating against the Greatsword Brothers who flanked him from either side.

But Ryoma was certainly alive. In fact, he was holding his own against the relentless attacks of the hit men.

Greatswords were the brothers' choice of weapon, each blade as long as an adult man was tall. The swords' sheer mass and the brothers' technique combined made each swing lethal. Compared to Ryoma's lightweight sword, they lacked dexterity but made up for it with power. Still, wearing their aura of energy, the brothers moved much faster than their appearance let on. They also staggered their attacks ever so slightly to cover each other, which made their onslaught anything but straightforward.

But they had yet to hit Ryoma. His movements were so relaxed and precise that some of the men in black had mistaken them for inaction; in reality, however, he was deftly keeping himself out of the flurry of greatswords, parrying only when he had to. He had even initiated a counterattack a few times already, and he was beginning to find openings in the brothers' coordination.

Who could have expected this?

Ryoma's attackers had been briefed on Ryoma's strengths, from observation and prediction. Naturally, one such prediction was about his melee combat ability. They had expected, however, that Ryoma's best talents would be his magic, which he'd demonstrated by plowing snow and demolishing old buildings and familiars that encompassed the many slimes he contracted. Ryoma's magic had become an integral part of Gimul, and everyone knew about Ryoma's slimes through his work.

However, the attackers had little to go on to discern how good of a fighter

Ryoma would be—other than that one story about him dominating a group of delinquent adventurers, they'd had only rumors. It had seemed prudent to focus their preparation on magic and slimes, because none of them had expected Ryoma's swordsmanship to be more of a threat than his other skills. This was especially considering how young he was. He was so skilled in magic that most people wondered how he would have trained so much in his short life; who could have predicted that, by all appearances, he'd spent even *more* time training with the sword?

No sane person would have guessed that Ryoma, apparently a preteen, had forty years' worth of swordsmanship training under his belt!

All things considered, the men in black had been very thorough in their preparation: they'd disabled Ryoma's magic, hired the Greatsword brothers, and even staffed what they'd thought would be enough backup support. If Ryoma had been any other child, they would have been in and out of the mountain in a flash, having completed their mission.

After less than thirty seconds of combat, the older brother grunted and stepped out of the thick of it, holding his faceguard in one hand.

His brother immediately put distance between him and Ryoma. "Brother?" he called.

"Just chipped the buckle." The faceguard dangled to one side of his helmet because of the broken buckle. He forcibly tore it the rest of the way off, at last revealing a scaly face.

"You're a dragonewt," Ryoma said.

"Unlike the one you've met, I wasn't born in the village," he confirmed. "I nearly didn't believe you'd fashioned a sword out of a slime."

"So you know about Asagi and my slime sword? You really did your homework," said Ryoma.

This sword had the same appearance as his previous one, but this time, it was made of a steel slime that had evolved from an iron slime. While it didn't come with any additional powers, the steel slime was more durable and better suited for a blade.

“Anyone who could jeopardize our mission, we research. As for the sword, we only heard a rumor that you were a slime maniac—hellbent on using slimes for everything imaginable,” one of the brothers said.

“Not a scratch after all this... It seems we underestimated you,” said the other.

Both of them raised their swords to attack, and the air about their blades flickered almost imperceptibly. It was a telltale sign that the amount of energy they used for enhancement had surpassed a certain threshold.



The mirage-like effect served as a warning—they were about to use a technique that required a *lot* of energy.

“Behold: the secret Greatsword technique!”

“Dragon’s Descent!” the younger brother cried, swinging his sword, which was now brimming with energy.

That energy became a tangible slash that flew towards Ryoma, carving its course in the ground. Just as Ryoma dove sideways to avoid it, the older brother followed ruthlessly.

“Dragon’s Descent!”

Ryoma lifted his sword, and the brothers saw how the air flickered unmistakably around his blade. The next moment, Ryoma had fired an identical slash that met the second brother’s and neutralized it. By then, the brothers had started their next attack, wielding the mirage-shrouded blades in unison this time.

“Secret Greatsword technique: Dragon Crossing!”

Blades flew, crossing into each other’s paths in pursuit of Ryoma. Once again, he held his slime sword high and brought it down, creating a larger slash than before to strike both blades at once, just as they crossed.

“I tip my hat to you,” one of the brothers said. “Not that I’m surprised to see you have technique.”

“You copied ours,” the other added.

“Strange thing to say to an opponent, but...your technique was so clean that it made it easier. They were perfect models,” Ryoma said.

The older brother’s frown deepened, and the other seemed to share his sentiment.

“How did you keep such a talent hidden?”

“I wasn’t trying to,” Ryoma explained. “Couldn’t if I tried. If I’m being honest, I was scared.”

“Scared?”

“Back in the forest, I was all alone, for better or worse. I just had to survive. But in the city—in human society—there are rules, from written laws and regulations to unspoken social contracts. Solving your problems with violence is frowned upon in most places. A quick way to make yourself a pariah. So I may be good at fighting, but I don’t like flaunting it. Also, using magic and slimes is usually more efficient for my jobs in the city,” Ryoma said.

“I see your point, but it is a foolish one. You are strong. Why put any stake in what the weak say or think of you?” the older brother asked.

“Strength is all that matters in this world,” the younger chimed in. “If anyone defies you, you can make them answer to your sword. You must understand that much.”

“The sad reality is that you do need strength to get what you want. Not necessarily violence, but authority, wealth, negotiation tactics... Without strength, things can be taken from you. I can’t deny that a part of me was reassured by the idea that I could kill my enemies if I really wanted to. If I’d never met the duke’s people in the forest of Gana...” As Ryoma spoke, more to himself than to his opponents, the aura about him grew more intense. “If I’d never been accepted by my friends in the city...at the very least, I wouldn’t be on the defensive. Could have been on your side of the line. I was just very, very lucky.”

“You are strong—and growing stronger,” said one of the brothers. “But with all of our strength, we will take you out.”

The flickering in the air spread, soon enveloping their entire bodies. More than just risking their lives, the brothers were ready to *spend* their lives to defeat Ryoma. That they were utilizing their true strength now was an indication of just how much their perception of Ryoma had changed.

“Let us begin!” the brothers declared.

Torchlight flashed in their armor as the brothers both darted towards Ryoma, abandoning technique for speed and power. Facing down two greatswords that could tear through his sword and body in one swing, Ryoma poured every drop of energy into his sword to compete against the brothers’ enhanced armor. Without energy left to enhance his body, Ryoma defended himself with precise,

minimal movements and pure swordsmanship.

Both sides were aiming to end the fight with one hit, and the battle became more intense with every clash of their swords. Their auras blended into one, like a pillar stretching to the heavens.

The battle ended suddenly.

Ryoma parried the younger brother's sword with the guard of his own, then stepped past the blade and struck his foe with the pommel of his sword. It wasn't a strong enough blow on its own to take down the brother, but the momentary stun was enough to disrupt the brothers' coordination. Ryoma turned to parry the older brother's sword coming for his neck, relaxing his arms at the moment of contact. Using the gravity and momentum of the sword, Ryoma deflected the blade. As soon as the sword was out of his way, Ryoma cut straight across the older brother's arms. Blood sprayed Ryoma as the brother dropped his sword.

A moment later, the younger brother swiped at Ryoma's neck, but met the same fate as his brother. Blood came gushing from the crack in his armor; his arms fell to his side.

The older brother chuckled. "It looks like we lost..."

"Looks like it," said his brother. "I'm sorry, brother."

"Don't be, brother."

Ryoma expected the brothers to fall then—both their arms were nearly severed, and they were completely spent from the battle. But the pair only let out a groan and took to their knees, their sharp gazes still held on Ryoma.

"A decisive strike to both of us."

"I might have carried on until the bitter end, if only my arms would budge... I'm almost glad it ended like this."

The flickering in the air about them grew fainter by the second. With all the blood loss, the brothers were on the brink of death.

"Where are the others?" one of them asked with great effort.

"Ran as soon as our battle was over," Ryoma said. "I expected them to attack

me.”

Screams of terror soon came from the direction in which the men in black had escaped. Keeping his attention on the brothers, Ryoma glanced in that direction to find them being caught by thorny weeds, growing through the layers of snow and pulling them down into the earth.

“Snared in my familiars’ traps, just now,” Ryoma said.

“I see... No wonder...we didn’t see them.”

“You set them up...not to defend...but to keep from escaping...”

“Brilliant,” the brothers said together, and fell flat on their faces.

The clatter of falling armor echoed through the mountain. Snow began to fall. Once Ryoma flicked his sword to shake the blood off the blade, quiet returned to the abandoned mines for the night.

Chapter 7, Episode 55: Follow-Up #1

A day after the Greatsword Brothers and company attacked me, I packed my dimension home full of supplies and returned to the city. As I was handing over those supplies, I recounted how the night went down. Naturally, the duke's staff—particularly Lilian, whom I had reassured of my safety before returning home last night—were not too happy to learn that I had put myself in harm's way. They soon put this issue on the back burner, though; after all, I *had* returned unscathed, and we still had a lot of work to do in the city.

Fortunately, my attempted assassination was apparently the final step in our opponent's master plan. We did not encounter any further attacks or sabotage of city operations, save for a few groups of vigilantes and looters. Continued law enforcement and support would soon return Gimul to normalcy. I began taking on various tasks to achieve that end.

Soon, a week flew by.

I was working in what I had decided to call the food production base for now, which was situated in an empty lot in what had previously been the slums. Lilian hurried in, huffing, "Excuse me."

"What's the matter?" I asked.

She explained how Reinhart and the others had returned and were currently at the security company.

"Aren't they early? The new year is an important holiday for noble society, I hear. We're only four days in," I said.

"They attended the most important function of the New Year's Season and canceled all subsequent plans. Currently, they are being briefed by the guilds and departments involved," Lilian explained. "They hope to see you tonight, when you and they can discuss matters at length, if needed."

"Got it. Let's call it a little early today, since I didn't have anything else planned," I proposed. "Once I finish the current batch, I think it'll be a good

time.”

“Understood. Another thing. Do you know where Hudom is?” she asked.

“Vegetable room, third floor,” I answered.

“The duke and duchess have requested his presence at the security company.”

“Oh...I see. Then let me take you to him.” I turned to a helper who had been sent from the Merchant’s Guild. “I’m sorry—I’ll be right back.”

“No problem! We’ll get these ready to ship.”

Then I took Lilian in the direction of a sign that read, “Monsters in Building: Keep Out.” We started up a flight of stairs.

“Every time I set foot here, I am amazed that you grow crops in here,” Lilian remarked.

“They’re just like potted plants,” I said.

Once we made it up the stairs to the second floor, Lilian looked around at the windowless space. It was floored with soil, illuminated with magical items attached to the ceiling, and temperature controlled. Potatoes grown in this controlled environment were now being harvested by the goblins.

I had envisioned this to be a contemporary food factory, even though it didn’t exactly look high-tech. Indeed, it was like I’d thrown a bunch of old-fashioned farms into a concrete building.

“I understand it’s like a greenhouse,” Lilian said. “But something’s different... Well, I certainly didn’t expect the new slime you told me about the other day to be the farm itself.”

“I was just as surprised when the scavenger slimes I had left to tend to the fields had evolved into compost slimes and fertile soil slimes. Not that I had trouble making sense of the evolution, but it was a new discovery.”

Compost slimes looked like dirt mounds and secreted solid fertilizer rather than liquid, heating up during the process. The composition of the fertilizer had slightly changed too. Produce magicified less frequently when using a large quantity of the stuff. While it had gotten less efficient than plain scavenger

slimes for my farming method of rapidly growing the crops with wood magic, fertilizers were supposed to be a specialized addition to soil. Further studying farming—learning, for example, when to use the liquid fertilizer from scavenger slimes and when to use the physical fertilizer from compost slimes—would drastically improve the quality of our harvests.

Fertile soil slimes looked like piles of dirt too; their only real distinction from mud slimes was that they contained plenty of nutrients rich for human consumption. The same slime really liked eating a blend of mostly compost slime fertilizer with a little bit of scavenger slime fertilizer, which produced a mysterious boost in productivity. Having weed slimes grow plants like the white clover that restored a soil's fertility was another way to make the slimes happier and more efficient.

Even accounting for my lack of farming knowledge, using the farming slimes allowed me to make the crops easier to grow—and they'd come out higher quality too.

What was more, a fertile soil slime could evolve into a soil slime, or vice versa. Upon research, I'd also found that some mud slimes and sand slimes that had taken a liking to the earth element also evolved into soil slimes. These factors led me to believe that the evolution of slimes was not a one-way street. I'd discovered that several different types of slimes could become the same after evolving. My experiments had shown that it was not even likely that their affinity for a certain element was fixed. This explained how there could be countless paths of slime evolution. In fact, if I'd tried to represent all the possible evolutions of each type of slime, I'd have ended up with an intricate tapestry, the many possibilities for each type and its evolutions interwoven.

Now I was beginning to wonder if it was appropriate to call this phenomenon evolution at all...but I decided to tackle that later.

"There he is," I said. "Hudom!"

"Hey, Chief. Miss Lilian. Great to see you."

"How is it going?" I asked.

"Third harvest now," Hudom answered. "All thanks to your slimes, but now we have enough to open up shop. Harvesting them is pretty easy with the help

of the goblins, especially when the farm itself is like that.”

Hudom chuckled, watching the goblin collect vegetables. In the ground, there were bunches of something that resembled large parsley or celery with finer leaves, evenly distributed throughout the patch of dirt. Harvesting them *would* mean digging them out one by one...but since my farm was sentient, it simply moved around, meaning we could take the vegetables without a fuss.

That meant that the goblins were not digging at all, eliminating the risk of damaging the crop with any shovels or the like. Compared to the normal harvesting process, this was incredibly quick and easy work. Eliminated the risk of missing some viable crops if they were root vegetables too.

“Kind of feel like we’re insulting traditional farmers, somehow, even though this is so convenient,” Hudom said.



“I can’t deny that,” I said. “But Hudom—I know it’s sudden, but I need you to go with Lilian to the security company headquarters as quickly as possible.” I added that the duke and duchess had returned, eager to talk to him.

Hudom’s expression sobered. “You got it. I’ll go right away. Just want to put myself together, if that’s okay.”

“We have changes of clothes at the security company. We can spare some time for that,” Lilian said.

Still looking solemn, Hudom left the food production plant with Lilian.

On their way out, they left me some advice.

“Please don’t feel like you have to go overboard with this,” Lilian said.

“The city still has some food stored away. These crops are just an extra buffer,” Hudom added.

I only had myself to blame that no one would trust me to manage my own workload for a while.



That night, I wrapped up my work earlier than normal as promised and came to the security company headquarters. Immediately, I was granted a meeting with the duke and duchess. Whether they had finished their other meeting already or had set aside time for me, I was ecstatic to see them after all this time.

Slightly anxious on account of what had happened over the past few days, I made my way to the small meeting room where I’d been told to go. Zeph and Camil stood on either side of the door—for security, I assumed. After I’d greeted them, I knocked on the door. I was invited in, and I entered to find the duke and duchess looking weary but relieved.

“It’s been a while,” I said.

“I’m so glad you’re all right, Ryoma.”

“Come. Take a seat.”

As the duchess waved me over, I took my seat across from the couple. Lulunese served us tea and snacks.

“Now, Ryoma, allow me to say this. From the bottom of our hearts, we appreciate all of your efforts to protect the city of Gimul. Thank you,” Reinhart started, and his wife agreed.

“Please, there’s no need for that,” I said. “I just did what I wanted to do. It might have worked out that it served the city and its people, but I was far from the only one doing so.” I meant it too. Not that I couldn’t have made some dent in the problem if I had been all on my own, but my impact would have been minuscule. Things would have gone down much like that dreaded meeting.

“But your life was threatened because of it,” said Reinhart.

“None of the blame lies with you,” I said. “You’ve heard the report, I assume.” When I had made my initial report on the attack, it had stirred up quite a commotion. Through that process, I had relayed some of my conversation with the Greatsword brothers and my thought process. As tactfully as I could, of course. “I really do appreciate your concern. And I trust you both. But...when it comes to fighting, I will always rely on my own strength before anyone else’s. I’ve always been that way, and I don’t see that changing anytime soon.”

I was self-aware enough to know that I was talented. Not that anyone would’ve caught me dead saying that out loud. How prideful would I have come across if they did? This wasn’t a talent bestowed upon me by a god either—it was one I’d inherited from my previous life.

A talent for fighting.

Ever since I could remember, I could usually copy a movement after watching it once and with a little bit of practice. Every time I saw a thug on the street or a martial artist on TV, I felt confident I could beat them if I ever had to fight them. My dad was probably the only person I ever felt like I didn’t stand a chance against.

Come to think of it, I might have decided to hire Fay and Lilyn because of that underlying confidence in my own abilities. Somehow, I doubted that people with *normal* sensibilities would think to hire former assassins. Truth be told, I would have traded a talent like that in a heartbeat for a talent in studying or

getting along with other people...but I supposed I should've counted my blessings.

In any case, I knew that I could take on most adults, let alone children, in a fight. Especially if I could use magic or work together with my slimes.

"You're...right, of course," Reinhart said. "We've known for a while now that you aren't just a kid to be protected. It sounds like you had your own fail-safes set up, and you've made it back just fine. So I won't make any protests about what you've done. Do you agree, Elise?"

"Yes. I'm sure someone or other has already told you everything I'd like to say. It's not that Ryoma doesn't understand our concern for him. Jill told me as much. But please be careful. If you ever feel that you need help, you can talk to us or anyone else."

I was almost expecting a lengthy session of us going in circles about this, but they conceded. Out of concern, though, Elise gave me one more reminder.

"I think you are repeating what he's been told, Elise."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I couldn't help it."

"I know how lucky I am to have people looking out for me," I said. "And if anyone should apologize, it's me...but I don't think this is something I can back down from." That didn't stop me from feeling bad about it, though.

"Don't worry about it," Reinhart said. "More importantly, Ryoma, what now?"

"Are you leaving the city?" Elise chimed in. "I heard you're leaving the management of your store to Serge's staff."

They were both looking at me anxiously, but I had no intentions of severing ties with them or anything. I'd just planned on taking more gigs as an adventurer. That was going to be my main job, anyway, with the goal of going to the Sea of Trees of Syrus. I was just having a lot more fun than I expected through getting used to the city and its people. So, I was off-loading my responsibilities in the city to make time for adventuring. Since I'd be away more than ever, I decided to leave Carme fully in charge of the laundry shop. Still, I'd remain involved in the business as the sponsor or owner. I wasn't going to close down shop or give up on any part of my lifestyle. When I told the duke and

duchess as much, their expressions brightened.

“I’d been putting off going to the Sea of Trees of Syrus, but I’m comfortable enough preparing food and treating wounds now that I think I finally ought to do it. I haven’t thought about what to do afterwards, but like I said, I have no intention of closing down my business. Not to mention the garbage plant. Once I’m finished, I’ll definitely return to the abandoned mines, and I plan to continue working as an adventurer with this city as my base of operations.”

“I’m very glad to hear that,” said Reinhart. “To be honest with you, that’s what I was concerned about the most—that we had dragged you out of that forest and made you live an unhappy life out here.”

“Not at all,” I said. “Like I always say, living in the city was wonderful. It was like a dream. It’s just that I don’t think it’s my style to stay in one place for too long. It’s a little easier on me if I get some distance once in a while... I’m selfish, at the end of the day.”

“Plenty of people don’t feel at home in large groups or cities,” Elise said. “It’s true those people are often isolated from society...but I think that’s just a part of who you are, Ryoma. I can’t tell you that I’m not sad you’re leaving, but I feel better that you’ll be coming back. At the end of the day, you should live the life you want to live.” She offered me a cup of tea and a snack. “Try these, Ryoma. We stopped by a famous shop in the capital before we left.”

“I will, thank you.” I took the snack she offered me. Sweetness burst in my mouth. Maybe it was the delicious treat or the smiles across from me, but I felt the atmosphere warm and lighten in the room.

We stayed in the meeting room awhile, celebrating each other’s safety.

Chapter 7, Episode 56: Follow-Up #2

It was nice to have a pleasant conversation with them for a short while, but I couldn't contain the question I was dying to ask.

"Uh, do you mind if I ask you something?" I asked.

"Of course," Reinhart answered. "You were in the thick of it, Ryoma. We know we owe you some explanations."

"Where would you like to start?" said Elise.

"For starters...is it all over?" I asked.

"Most certainly," Reinhart said. "The man who orchestrated the attacks is gone. After getting the proof we needed, I raided his manor with a squadron of royal knights and executed him myself. I've been told you know his identity already."

"Guessing from what Hudom told me...he was the Earl Volcano. Son of the former margrave who ruled where Lord Reinbach made his name for signing a divine beast."

Reinhart nodded and explained the rest. This was the gist:

It had been back when the previous duke, Reinbach Jamil, had successfully contracted a divine beast as his familiar. In order to protect his land and people, which were being ravaged by dragons, the margrave at the time—Volcano's father—and his army risked their lives to fend off the first attack, but they couldn't fight off the subsequent waves. Dragonfire burned down cities, racking up casualties. Later, the dragons had been driven away by Reinbach, who'd been awarded praise and glory, while the lord of the land at the time, the former margrave, had been accused of incompetence.

"Lots of infighting among nobles," Elise chimed in. "Many nobles in the military defended the margrave's actions, of course. But those who'd only known battles from inside palace walls—and those who had vendettas against him—would criticize him behind his back for failing to protect his land, even

with his militia in tow, when Reinbach had done so all on his own. He lost a lot of power and money. He was injured from battle. His heir, the man behind the attacks on Gimul, was a newborn at the time. Deemed unfit to rule, his land was temporarily returned to the king... It was an unfortunate combination.”

“He would have been reinstated once the dust had settled—would’ve kept his title and everything. I even heard that he was secretly engaged to a marquis’s daughter... He couldn’t live with how he’d been treated, though,” Reinhart said.

When Reinhart had led the knights into the manor, the only ones inside were the earl and an elderly servant. There were no valuables left in the house. The earl had taken poison, along with a magical potion that boosted his physical strength—he’d come swinging at Reinhart. In the end, he’d used a magical item to set the manor ablaze in an attempt to take out everyone there with him.

“Some nobles did aid in his cause,” said Reinhart. “But none of them had the power or the gumption to oppose us out in the open. Especially since we have evidence incriminating some of them in other crimes. They wouldn’t be scheming to do anything else, not while they have bigger fires to put out. If I had to mention being concerned about anything, it would be the involvement of the underground guild and the fact that valuables were missing from the earl’s house. Still, they won’t be pulling off anything nearly as large-scale as this attack. Some of my staff and the knights’ order are still investigating in the capital. Serge’s would-have-been assassin is another lead in our grasp.”

Oh, yeah. I forgot about him. The assassin who’d tried to take Serge’s life was currently detained in a special room in the basement. Upon apprehending and unarming him, a poison slime indicated that he had taken a slow-acting poison. Quite a commotion that had caused, but a Cleaner Slime stomach pump had bought us time and produced a sample of the poison so the medical team could conjure up an antidote, which they’d done in time. The assassin was alive and exhausted. We didn’t know exactly how much the assailant had been privy to, and he would face strict interrogation when the time was right.

Elise carried on gravely, “There’s something we need to consider first.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Other nobles trying to headhunt you,” she said.

Apparently, my actions were a topic of gossip among nobles. I'd known it would only be a matter of time before the other nobles would hear of me and my actions... Well, I supposed that time had come. Of course, I wouldn't change a thing I'd done, though.

"We can't ignore that, both for the benefit of our people and us personally. To make things easier, we would like to officially offer you a position as an engineer," Elise said.

"A full-time technician position, you mean. If I recall correctly, you offered me the position of Third Engineer before," I said.

"That's what we had in mind when we last spoke about it. Considering how you helped solve this case and jumped into helping with the rescues right after—not to mention everything else you've done along the way—I think Second Engineer is more fitting," she said. "In particular, your highly efficient slime-run farms and supplements made from argan slime moss can both save people from starvation. Those accomplishments alone would be enough for us to make you an engineer."

"So we would be honored if you accepted this position," Reinhart said. "What do you say?"

I was honored by the offer, and I knew it'd be my best option for avoiding unwanted dealings with other nobles in the near future. Still, I hesitated to accept.

Elise gently demanded an explanation. "Don't hesitate to tell us if you have any concerns or requests."

"No requests," I said. "It's a wonderful offer. One I don't deserve. I must have said this before, but I am a selfish person. But if I had the title of duke's engineer, it would mean that any trouble I caused would come back to hurt the Jamils' reputation. That's what I'm worried about, to be honest."

Thinking back on it now, I chose to be a hermit in the woods and live in an abandoned mine outside the city because, deep down, I was anxious about city life and the social pressure it represented. Even in Japan, I'd always felt like I didn't quite belong. So how could I have completely blended into a city in another world, with its own culture and customs?

If I had left Earth when I was younger... I sometimes wondered this, but I'd remind myself that I hadn't fit in when I was young either. The best I could hope for was that I hadn't made too many remarks like, "Back in my day." So what was going to happen when I grew older in this world? Once upon a time, I would have told myself to keep trying. To not give up. I'd have told myself an optimistic lie, all the while bottling up how I really felt. Underneath all the self-encouragement, I never really trusted myself to change.

Now that I'd realized that about myself, I could finally admit that I couldn't do it. Pessimism lightened the load on my heart. Therefore I'd live my life the way I wanted to and let the chips fall where they may. If people were unhappy about that, that was their prerogative...unless that came back to haunt the Jamils, their staff, or anyone else I cared about. In human society, it wasn't uncommon for a whole organization to take the blame for the actions of one of its members. Back in Japan, I'd occasionally heard about new hires doing something stupid that ruined their company's reputation. If I ended up repaying the Jamils' kindness by harming their reputation, I really couldn't live with myself.

Choosing my words carefully, I explained to the duke and duchess that this was how I honestly felt. Even though I was flat-out refusing their kindness, their mouths curved into smiles.

"I think I see how independent you've finally become, Ryoma. You're much more grown up than we thought." Elise's tone suddenly changed. "But we can't take no for an answer this time. As we've said, your accomplishments are already widely known. Nobles who won't recognize accomplishments with proper rewards lose support. Other nobles will call us out on it too. To protect our reputation, I need you to accept, whether you like it or not. Especially since you understand how the actions of an individual can affect those around them."

"Elise is right," Reinhart said. "Just in case you've forgotten, there's a requirement to maintaining your position as engineer. Annually, you should be able to present a certain amount of progress in your research. I'll be giving you some leeway, but failure to show progress for long enough will force me to revoke your position. I can do the same if you're involved in any scandal too. If I ever think that the drawbacks of keeping you around outweigh the benefits, I

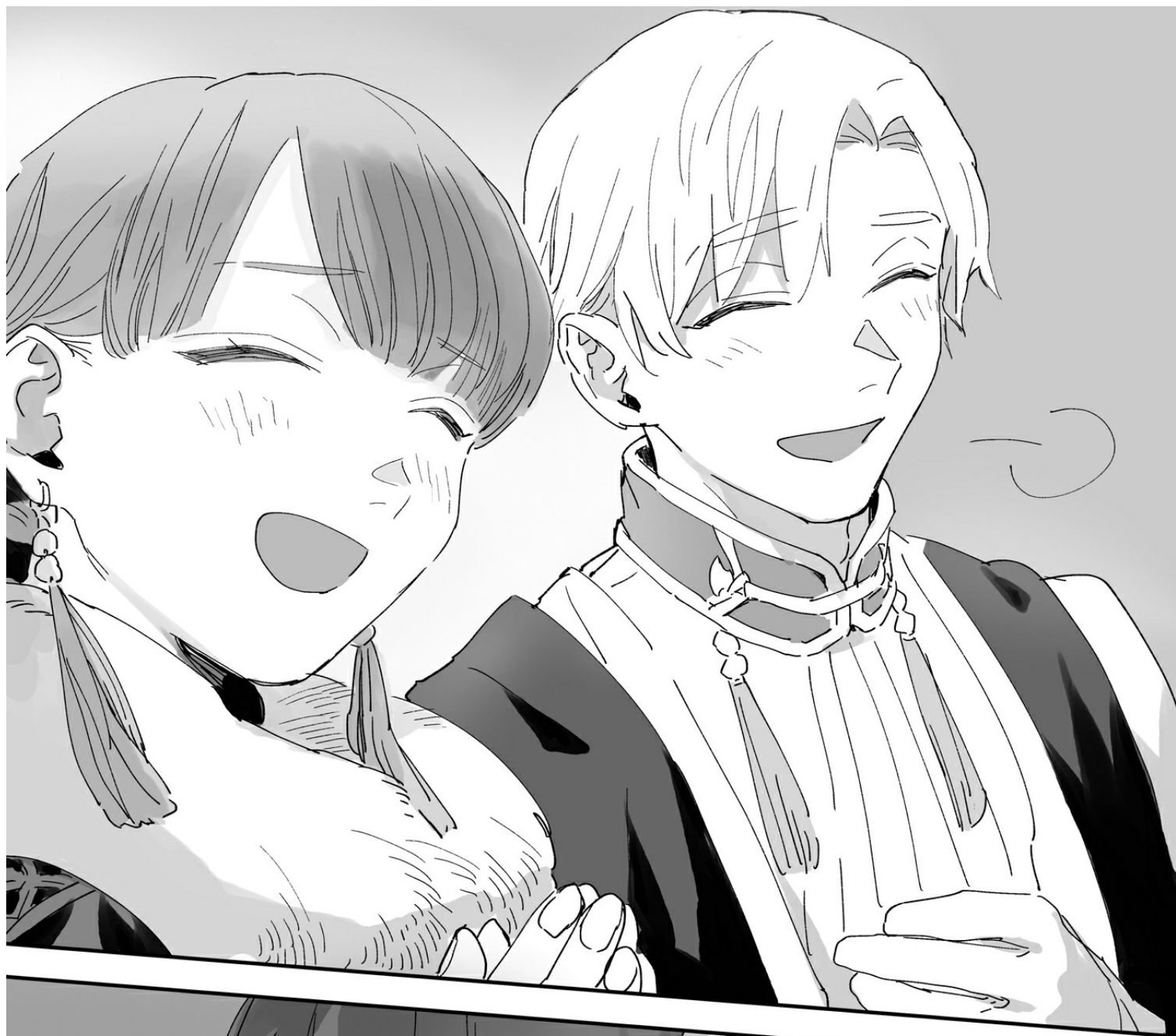
won't hesitate to toss you to the wind."

Well, they'd given me no choice—I couldn't even argue. While I sensed some truth in their harsh command, they had spoken like this on purpose. To reassure me that they'd let me hang if something were to happen, so I shouldn't let that prevent me from accepting their offer. It must have been hard for them to tie my hands like this and even threaten to cut me loose if I brought trouble... However I might try to argue, I could tell they wouldn't budge. No doubt this was a great opportunity, so I didn't feel the need to drag out the negotiations.

"All right. I'll humbly accept the job," I said.

The duke and duchess flashed me gentle smiles.

"Wonderful," Elise said. "I'll just need your signature on a few papers. Oh, what should we put down as your specialty? You have a lot of ventures in the works."



“Can you put ‘slime research’ on there?” I asked. It was true that I’d dabbled in various projects, but at the center of them all had been the research into my slimes. What else could I claim to be an expert on, if not that?

“I thought you’d say that,” Elise said.

“Would that be a problem?” I asked.

“There’s no precedent, but it’s definitely not a problem. Also... Oh, I wanted to ask you about Baron Veldoole’s son.”

Who? It took me a second, but a face came to mind. “You mean Hudom?”

“Yes. You didn’t know his family name?” Reinhart asked.

“Only that his father was a duke. He said he didn’t deserve to use his family name, and I didn’t want to pry. I’m sorry to derail our conversation.”

“That’s all right,” Elise said. “Feel free to ask us any questions. I think we’ve told you before about how we provide protection, funds, and places and assistants for your experiments, if needed. What would you think of hiring Hudom Veldoole as your assistant?”

“If I were to hire an assistant, I’d prefer Hudom to any stranger, since I’m comfortable with him. But isn’t he currently employed?”

“About that... We’re going to be holding on to him for a while,” Reinhart explained. “We trust His Majesty, but since he had employed the baron’s son as a spy, he thought it wise to keep him in our company both to safeguard the young man’s secrets and as a token of apology for sending him in the first place... That’s not all of his reasons, though.” His face showing a hint of weariness, Reinhart sipped on his tea. There had clearly been some back-and-forth about Hudom, but if he and Elise, and even the king approved, I certainly had no qualms against making Hudom my assistant. Especially when I’d kept him by my side knowing full well that he was a spy.

“So he’s been slated to work for us,” Elise continued. “Change in our staff can be an ordeal. Rather than assign him some meaningless post, we thought it would be best for him to continue working for you.”

“That’s what he requested too,” Reinhart said. “He had no complaints about

his terms of employment, and he thinks he can keep up his training with you and your other employees. The part about him going on a training journey was true.”

“That makes sense. As long as you and he are happy with it, so am I,” I said. “He was popular at the shop, and he’ll be of great help when it looks like business is only growing there.”

“It’s settled, then. By the way, as long as you are in our care, I won’t tolerate him leaking information to anybody—even the royal family—so don’t worry about that,” Reinhart said.

“Once you’re an engineer, you can treat your shop as a ‘workshop’ or ‘laboratory,’ especially if it helps your business,” Elise added.

This was a great perk. Even though I had always been under some protection of the Jamils, my official engineer title would solidify their protection and make my business more trustworthy. “Thank you.”

“Quid pro quo, since you’re providing us with your expertise. In fact, I’d feel better if you demanded more from us,” Reinhart admitted.

Something else I could demand...? I had to think about that one; there was nothing to be found off the top of my mind. “Demand... Well, we’re short on lumber right now. Firewood, especially.”

“As for that, we’ve already requested aid from nearby cities, as much as possible,” said Reinhart. “Our space magic users are on it, taking care of communication and transportation. Deliveries should start coming in any day now. And that’s something the *city* needs, Ryoma. Not you.”

“That’s the only thing that comes to mind right now,” I said.

“Doesn’t have to be now or never,” Elise said. “Just tell us when there’s something you need.” She turned to Reinhart. “He keeps calling himself selfish, and all he can think about is helping other people!”

“I do it *because* I’m selfish. Just like a really sinister villain doesn’t look the part, being openly selfish is a quick way to lose respect and lose out on the benefits that come with the respect of others in the long run. The most efficient way to be selfish is to act selfless—at least on the surface.”

Reinhart responded like I was an obstinate child. “I understand what you’re saying, and I suppose you’re right...”

“But at the end of the day,” Elise added, “you’re still being selfless.”

A few moments passed, before we all burst out laughing. Once we’d settled down, we went over all the details of my new position, the night peacefully darkening outside.

Chapter 7, Episode 57: Follow-Up #3

“Shall we?”

The day after I’d been officially taken on by the Jamils as their engineer, I was to accompany Reinhart’s inspection of the city. We climbed into the carriage and sat on the cushioned seats. After the coachman closed the door, we rolled out smoothly.

We talked occasionally throughout the ride, and the duke and duchess observed the city streets from their windows on either side of the carriage. Keeping up the pretense of enjoying a leisurely ride, they were constantly noting things about the current state of the city.

“Oh.”

“Spot anything?” Reinhart asked.

Elise shook her head. “There was someone from the security company on that corner back there, and there was a crowd of people very happy to see him.”

“That’s probably one of the workers who served as a firefighter during the attacks,” I noted.

“Oh, the ones who wore all that gear and went right into the fire. That makes sense,” said Elise.

Those firefighters were celebrities now. Everyone greeted them when they walked down the street, and they told me that they were hard-pressed to pay for their own drinks in a bar without the bartender or other patrons buying it for them. One of them had even been approached by someone who wanted to introduce their daughter for him to court. Of course, these people had risked their lives jumping into burning buildings to perform rescues. That was no small feat, even with their fire suits, and it was only natural for anyone in the city—let alone those who’d actually been rescued—to want to express their gratitude.

Truth be told, when I’d proposed the original ideas for the firefighting squads and fire suits, I hadn’t expected anyone to charge into burning buildings. I was a

complete amateur when it came to firefighting, really. Firefighters from Japan had inspired the firesuit themselves, but the only “training” I’d had on the craft was a crash course I’d gotten from an old self-proclaimed ex-ranger of the self defense force at a neighborhood watch meeting I was forced to attend.

With half-baked knowledge and equipment manufactured in a rush, I could have never asked the workers of the security company, who were day laborers with no ties to the city to begin with, to jump into literal fire. If I had dared to ask, I never would have expected anyone to do it.

To my (frankly rude) surprise, they had volunteered to do so. When I’d explained the effectiveness of the suit, I had outlined the results of my experiments, stating that the suits would protect them for a very short time in actual fire. This had prompted several volunteers, including the leader of the Brawny Boys.

At first, I’d had to hold them back. After more experiments and iterations, when I had begun to trust the equipment, more volunteers had come forward, which had inspired the team of artisans manufacturing the gear.

When the time had come to use them, charging directly into fire had become a viable option. After seeing them in action, the artisans had even suggested ideas to further improve the firesuit.

While the original idea had come from my vague knowledge of firefighting in Japan, the ones who’d really made the firesuit a reality were the artisans and firefighters of Gimul. What we were seeing on the streets now was just the fruit of their labor and passion.

Of course, the constabulary that had always protected the city was properly acknowledged, and even though law enforcement had once kept a close eye on adventurers, the reputation of those who had aided in protecting the city was restored. Meanwhile, members of the Tamer’s Guild, Merchant’s Guild, and the city’s officials had garnered thanks for how they’d helped support the cleanup efforts.

“Oh!” said Reinhart.

“Something catch your attention?” Elise asked her husband.

“I see a lot of cat beastkin in this area, and I’m wondering why,” he said.

“Oh... There’s an inn that’s popular with them in this neighborhood, so I assume that’s why.”

“Judging by the look on your face, you’re involved with that inn too,” Reinhart noted.

I didn’t know what look he was talking about, but he wasn’t wrong. “Very much so. I run the inn. I had built it for the incoming laborers, with just enough space and furniture to sleep in at night. For some reason it grew very popular with cat beastkin...”

For this, I had taken inspiration from the capsule hotels of Japan. Not the fancy, modern kind, but the old-fashioned, bare-bones ones. Even though I had used the down of fluff slimes in the bedding and soundproofed each compartment very well, the inn was basically jam-packed with bunk beds, each “room” essentially a cramped box...which was apparently a huge hit among the feline beastkin. One time, I had taken Miya, the cat beastkin adventurer; Mizelia, the tiger beastkin; and Lulunese to get their opinion on it. Consensus was that the space was tight, but that somehow made it more relaxing. Something about it appealed to their species, I guess. This had led to cat beastkin being the only repeat customers of the inn while the rest of the customer base was as intended: people who chose the inn solely for the dirt-cheap price or because it was the last inn with any vacancy in town. Those people naturally did not come back often. As a result, the number of cat beastkin guests had gradually grown until the inn now almost exclusively catered to them.

“I did get a short report on that inn, now that you mention it,” said Reinhart, “but I didn’t know how the business had evolved.”

“Unless there’s trouble, I don’t go down there either. I completely delegated the day-to-day operations,” I said. This style of business operation was best suited for me, I think.

For the rest of the carriage ride, we continued talking about the glimpses of the city that passed by in the windows. While they discussed what they could do on the spot, they were also noting things to look into later. Even during transit,

they didn't take a break.

After half an hour of watching the noble power couple at work in the soft jostling of the carriage, we had arrived where a series of temporary housing units stood in the northern part of the city.

Here had once stood a long row of lumber dealers' warehouses; unfortunately, they'd been burned down during the attack. The temporary housing project had started after negotiations between the city clerk and the owners of the lots, in an attempt to utilize the surviving lumber and plots. These, however, were incomplete. None of the original structures remained, but half of the lots were still occupied by debris from the demolition. My next job was to clear all that debris while the duke and duchess made their rounds.

A torrent of people greeted our carriage—it must have included a lot more than just the residents of the temporary housing. I couldn't even begin to count how many people were waiting out there.

"I'll go ahead and get ready," I said in salute to the noble couple who must face that crowd. They nodded at me, quite calm, and then elegantly climbed out of the carriage.

I wondered what the people felt when they saw their duke and duchess. No cheers or booing—instead, a strange quietness filled the air. Through the opening in the carriage door, though, I could see the crowd was fixated on Reinhart and Elise. As they were led away by security personnel, every eye in the crowd following them, I slipped out of the carriage and headed to my job site.

"Over here!"

I met up with the foreman assigned by the city council and went over our agenda.

"Carriages for transport?" I asked.

"Five parked by the road," he answered.

"I see... That may not even cover the wood alone. Can we get a few more, considering we'll be turning the rubble into building blocks as well?" I asked.

“We can request additional carriages,” the foreman said. “But can’t we use the same carriages? Once for the lumber, then for the building blocks? I was told that we’d be sorting the rubble, then turning them into usable lumber and blocks before loading the carriages...”

“We are, just in an unorthodox way that is more efficient. If possible, I would like a line of carriages along the rubble,” I said.

“Y-Yes, since it may affect traffic... They may not arrive until the duke and duchess have left, but I will ask about it.”

“Thank you.”

We continued to hash out work details until we were ready, then waited for the Jamils to return.

As I was reviewing the workflow of the project, a voice quietly called from behind, “Hey, you.”

“What?”

For some time, I had noticed some children I didn’t know watching me, but I hadn’t expected them to talk to me. I turned to find five children in total, four of them younger than me and the youngest about five. The fifth looked like a middle schooler, maybe put in charge of babysitting for the day. I was getting major *déjà vu*.

Judging by where the children were standing, I assumed the middle schooler restlessly looking to and fro was the one who’d called me. “Yes? Can I help you?” I asked.

“Yeah! Here you go!” The boy closest to me outstretched his arms. In his hands he cupped a plain, undecorated snowman.

“This is for me?”

“Yeah! Thank you for saving me!” the boy said.

That finally made me recognize the boy as the one who had been kidnapped the other day. “Yes, I remember you. You look much better.”

“Mommy was there when I woke up!”

“His mom told him about you,” said the teen. “He wanted to thank you.”

“All right... Thank you!” I said. “I’ll happily take this with me—”

But when I reached for his token of appreciation, the snowman moved. The kid hadn’t moved his hand or anything, but the top half of the snowman moved as if to twist away from my grasp.

Is that...?

“Oh, don’t!”

“He doesn’t like you touching him.”

“The thing’ll run if you touch it!”

The children’s warnings confirmed my instinct. Just to be safe, I Appraised it.

Snow Slime

Skills: Flight—1 Keep Cold—3 Lighten—10 Absorption—1 Divide—3

“A slime!” I exclaimed. “Not ice, but a *snow* slime?! I’ve never seen this kind before!”

“Said they found it while they were playing in the snow,” the teen explained. “They heard you like slimes, so they kept insisting that we give it to you...”

“Wait, don’t look sorry! I’m so happy! Thank you so, so much!” I said.

“G-Great... You really do like slime, huh?”

I thanked the other children all over again and contracted with the snow slime. Surely the snow slime would be as heat-averse as any ice slime, so I whipped up an impromptu cooler box with some rubble and magic.

Never would I have expected to meet a new slime like this. The snow slime seemed similar to the ice slime, and I was dying to know how they were different and how differently they evolved. I suspected there was more at play than mere humidity.

As I was pondering those things, Reinhart and Elise returned ahead of schedule.

“Oh? Have you made new friends?” Elise asked.

“Looks like you’re having fun,” Reinhart said.

“Oh, welcome back!” I greeted them.

Following them were the guards, who were followed in turn by the locals. Meanwhile, the children who had given me the slime were starting to look like they didn’t know what to do. The teen was even looking a little pale.

I cleared my throat. “I had the opportunity to help him the other day, and these wonderful children came to thank me, by gifting me something very rare—an evolved slime. I don’t know yet what the slime’s capabilities are, but it’s a very valuable contribution to my research, for sure.”

Reinhart smiled. “I see. If it helps your research, Ryoma, it may very well help us and everyone on our land.” His smile drew smiles out from the children, while the teen kept bowing, as if he were one of those toy birds that keeps dipping its beak to drink water. The kids were the opposite of *in trouble*, but letting them go now might’ve been the best option for the teenager’s mental health. Now that the duke and duchess had returned, we’d have work to do too.

“Shall we begin?” I asked.

“Not to rush you,” he said. “But if you’re ready, let’s start. Once we get the children somewhere safe.”

“Yes, my lord!” one of the security guards replied. “This way, children,” he called, respectfully escorting the children away.

I turned to the left to find about ten carriages lining the street by the row of rubble-strewn plots, as I’d requested. When I asked if I could begin removing the debris, the man in charge gave me the green light.

“Then, I’ll get started,” I said. My task was to remove the debris. I could have done it all at once with slime magic, but I’d decided to take a different approach today. “Dimension Home,” I said.

To a chorus of amazement from the crowd, a slime emerged—an enormous, translucent tentacle reached out from the familiar space portal. It was an

emperor scavenger slime, an amalgamation of ten thousand scavenger slimes.

“It’s huge!”

“Is that really a slime...?”

“Mommy, look at the gigantic slime!”

“I never expected to see a slime like that.”

“Where did he catch that thing?”

“Don’t ask me. But are you really surprised he has a rare slime with him?”

“Guess not.”

Amidst all the shock, I could hear the crowd accepting this reality a little too easily.

Anyway, my job was already halfway done. At its absolute smallest, the emperor scavenger slime was a spherical blob with a radius of three meters. People had no reason to encounter a slime like this in their normal life span. Safe to say, it left a lasting impression on the public.

In order for me to stay out of trouble in the future, it was imperative for me to advertise the fact that I was now the duke’s engineer. Even though there was no minimum age for the job, it was very possible that people would assume nepotism, based on how young I was. For that reason, I needed to show off the sort of accomplishment that everyone could easily recognize. To that end, I had decided to break out a slime I had intentionally kept hidden from the general public. This was a showcase of my abilities as an engineer.

I would also do the work well, of course. I’d have to demonstrate how much use I could be.



“We’re going to start by loading the lumber,” I called out. “Ready the first carriage, please!”

With my direction, the emperor scavenger grew even bigger, until it covered the rubbled plot entirely.

“Uh, while slimes are seen as weak by most,” I explained, “even the least powerful slime can pick up something light or carry it on its body. With a slime this enormous, it can move heavy debris and fallen trees, as you can see. Also, slimes are excellent at identifying objects. You’ll see how...”

I continued commentating to the crowd as debris of all shapes and sizes were taken in by the slime, sorted in the blink of an eye, and deposited out of one of its tentacles.

Stones piled up near me, while pieces of lumber were stacked onto the carriages lining the plot. It was like watching heavy machinery with a conveyor belt operate. Even in a world filled with magic, the emperor scavenger must have been the most efficient method of sorting debris that most people had seen. The coachmen, who seemed to have overestimated how much downtime they would have until they were needed, snapped back into action.

While I felt a little bad for them, I decided to speed things up a little. I shared the emperor scavenger’s vision, gaining an accurate picture of where and how the debris was organized.

Then, I cast an earth spell: “Create blocks.” Piles of debris turned into building blocks of uniform sizes, sinking into the slime. “Stone blocks are coming too!” I called.

Piles of debris were sorted, treated, stacked onto the carriages, and immediately replaced by more piles. The carriages rapidly filled with lumber and building blocks as the plots cleared out by the minute.

It must have been a satisfying sight to the crowd, because I started hearing some cheers mixed in with the amazed murmurs.



One hour later...

“Great job, Ryoma.”

“You must be tired. I brought you something to drink.”

“Thank you. I’m not too tired physically, and I haven’t expended too much magical energy, but performing in front of the crowd made me nervous,” I admitted.

I had been told that two large buildings’ worth of debris had to be cleared. The carriages were completely full after thirty minutes, so I’d been stuck for another thirty minutes waiting for the carriages to deposit the materials and return, drawing the full attention of the crowd the whole time. With the public announcement of my appointment as an engineer, I feel like people saw me differently than before. Although I didn’t sense any malice from the crowd, there was something about the situation that made me very aware of every movement I made.

“I’m sorry,” Reinhart said. “But it’s just for today.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “It’s all to mitigate any trouble in the future.”

“Don’t worry about it too much,” said Elise. “Make sure you get a good lunch. You also run the restaurant we’re going to, right?”

“I do, but are you sure that’s where you want to eat?”

We were going to eat out for lunch, and I had expected them to want to go to a high-end restaurant like the one Orest had taken us to. However, they showed interest in dining at the worker’s canteen, the dining hall I had invested in. Fast, cheap, and filling were the operating principles of that place. Not that the food was revolting by any means, but it wasn’t a place you would ordinarily catch a noble—much less a duke or duchess—dining at.

“It’s part of our inspection,” Elise said. “We need to see firsthand what the average person in town might eat for lunch.”

“Besides, we used to be adventurers. We were no strangers to Gimul’s taverns,” said Reinhart.

“That’s right. You’ve told me about that.” The Jamils were all very approachable, I thought. In a good way, they didn’t act like typical nobles.

“Right. Remember how I told you that everyone in my family is supposed to go on a journey alone once they come of age? That’s so we can understand how our people live. There are countless examples in history books where a lord never took into account how his people really felt and ended up falling to an uprising.”

“I have heard of that,” I said.

“If we were seen dining at a high-end establishment when the city hadn’t even recovered from the attacks, what would people think? Even if they could rationalize our decision, I don’t think it would sit right with them,” Elise pointed out.

“That’s true,” I said.

“Nobles don’t *need* to eat extravagant food all the time,” she continued. “I prefer to take my time and enjoy my meals, for one. So a normal restaurant is perfect for days like this. Speaking of, what are some popular items on your menu?”

“Well...I usually recommend the sprint rabbit stew, potato salad, and a stir-fry of goblin gourd, eggs, sausage, and tofu. Will that be all right?” I asked.

While keeping prices down was a priority for this restaurant, it wasn’t good business practice to lower the price to unprofitable levels. Not to mention that if we undercut other restaurants too severely, it could hurt *their* business. So the canteen used edible (and legal) ingredients that weren’t usually utilized in restaurants; that way we could differentiate our menu and offer the dishes for cheap.

Goblin gourd, for example, was a gourd the size of an okra pod. Its bitter taste made it an unpopular ingredient. Its name came from the fact that goblins loved eating this crop, either because of its high nutritional content or because goblins had unique taste buds. Another theory for its etymology came from the idea that it was an aphrodisiac. As a result, people with less decorum tended to call the crop a goblin *member*.

“I’ve eaten a few in my adventurer days,” Elise said. “I’m looking forward to tasting their rendition.”

“I’m more stuck on this...tofu, was it?” said Reinhart.

“Tofu is processed beans,” I explained. “Ground beans are solidified with a coagulant. I learned how to make it in Fatoma.”

By learning how to make tofu, I had been able to use soybeans in different ways: tofu, soy pulp, kinako powder. Since Fatoma also had something similar to soy sauce made from fish, I often wondered if someone from Japan had settled there.

“Your travels to Fatoma were fruitful, then,” Reinhart said.

“Yes, I learned a lot there,” I said. “Um, is something wrong?”

“Not at all,” he said. “I’m just happy for you.”

“Me too,” Elise chimed in. I didn’t know what he was getting at, but Elise seemed to. “You may not realize this, Ryoma, but you come to life when you talk about new things you’ve discovered or learned, especially through your travels. Just not quite as excited as you get when you talk about slime.”

“I do enjoy researching and experimenting in general,” I said.

“And that’s a great thing,” Elise said. “You should take in this world however you want and learn from it whatever you like. I am confident that will be the best thing for you, and the best way for you to help us in the long run.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Reinhart said. “Oh, looks like we’re here.”

The carriage slowed to a halt, and I could hear cheerful voices outside. The canteen was bustling for the lunch rush. Peeking out of the window, I could see the line of patrons spilling out of the place, all smiling.

Gimul and its people had been greatly hurt, but they still carried on. I hadn’t seen anyone on the streets or at the rubble lots, or now at the canteen, who had given up in woe for what had happened. Everyone seemed to be fighting in their own way for a brighter tomorrow.

I doubted it would take long for the city of Gimul to return to normal. Unlike the gods, I couldn’t tell the future for certain, but I had a strong feeling about this. If I had been of help in any way to these people while I enjoyed my own life—if I could keep living the way I wanted to while helping these people—that

would make me happier than I had ever dared hope for.

Now I wished for nothing more than for my life to continue like this. Carrying on towards a brighter tomorrow with everyone in my life.

Special: Meanwhile, in the Divine Realm...

“All’s well that ends well, don’t they say?” Serelipta, the god of water, muttered.

The earth goddess Wilieris’s usually gentle features twisted sternly. “That’s rich, coming from you. You made sure Ryoma was alone when he was attacked.”

“I just gave him a little advice... We all knew he didn’t want to get anyone else involved, if he could have helped it. I think I was respecting his wishes. It’s not like I directly caused the attacks. What’s your problem?”

“I am not telling you not to speak to him. We speak to humans directly on occasion. But why did you have to intentionally throw him into a dangerous situation?” Wilieris asked.

“Ryoma could have been in the heart of the city, and they would have carried out the attack. That’s why they had amassed such a large team. No matter how secure Gimul is on paper, there would be some gaps in security during emergencies. They were planning the attack on the city for five years. There were plenty of ways they could have gone in and out of the city without being detected. They’d picked up on Ryoma leaving the city. If he was going to be attacked either way, I think Ryoma was safer alone, so he didn’t have to worry about anyone else.”

“You always—”

“Knock it off, Wilieris,” the goddess of war, Kiriluel, grumbled. “Serelipta’s annoying. That’s not news. And you know more than anybody there’s no talking sense into him.”

“Ryoma was unhurt,” Lulutia chimed in. “Nor did he interfere in anyone’s actions but his own. And he only gave advice to help Ryoma get what he wanted...”

“Regardless of how you feel about him, it’s a tough call if he’s broken a code

or not,” said Tekun. “I know the fact that he pushes the line makes it even more infuriating.”

“Don’t you both get tired of this?” Kufo asked.

“You’re wasting your time if you’re trying to reason with him,” said Fernobelias.

“Let’s just calm down a bit, now,” added Grimp.

“I’ll admit, I am a bit frustrated,” Wilieris said. “But why isolate Ryoma when he was going to be attacked, regardless?”

Serelipta shrugged. “With or without my advice, Ryoma would have handled the situation the same way. So I made sure to tell Ryoma things ‘might’ clear up. It didn’t make a major difference. I just recommended a course of action that had a slightly better chance of working out for Ryoma than the alternative did.”

“You can’t expect change to come so suddenly,” Wilieris said.

“You need more of a sense of urgency, Wilieris,” Serelipta countered. “A decade or two is a blink of an eye to us, but a long time for a human. That’s why change comes so suddenly to them. Why they’re always changing.”

“And what if Ryoma had chosen to throw everything away?” asked Wilieris.

“Not that I could guarantee it, but I highly doubt he ever would have done that. He really does treasure his lifestyle, and he’s not the type to get carried away by violence. In fact, he’s much more restrained than the average human, so much so that sometimes he can’t get his head above the water. He wouldn’t throw away everything, forsaking his responsibility as a business owner and disregarding the harm he’d do to others. If he had been the type of person who could be so reckless, with no regard for those around him, he would have snapped in his previous life,” said Serelipta.

Wilieris remained silent. Serelipta continued, “Well, even if he goes to one extreme, I wouldn’t mind it. Humans kill each other all the time for selfish reasons. Even animals kill for survival. Ryoma deserves to choose his own path and follow it. Besides, the fewer people around him, the higher his chance of survival is. Where he fought, he could have used his slime magic without

reservations. No concern for roping anyone in or protecting someone who would only slow him down.”

“You may have a point,” Lulutia said.

Tekun grunted in agreement. “Even if Ryoma couldn’t have beaten those brothers, he wouldn’t have died.”

“Ryoma made sure to fight atop one of his slimes,” Kufo noted. “Even with his magic disabled, he only needed to give one signal to set off a trap or make an escape. He’s very thorough, for one thing.”

Kiriluel responded, “Nothing wrong with being thorough. Even the best soldiers can be taken out by anyone because of one mistake. There’s no guarantee on the battlefield. That being said, I agree that it’s highly unlikely for Ryoma ever to lose a fair fight. If he hadn’t been a casualty of the stupid games the Earth gods were playing, he would have made his name as a martial artist or something. At least enough to open his own dojo. It’s regrettable how much potential had been locked out of his life.”

“Apparently, the weapon of choice in Earth wars in his time period are firearms. And Japan is a peaceful country. His talents didn’t match up with his time period or environment, even though his environment had been tampered with for that very purpose. He was surrounded by morons who loved nothing more than to spew their moral high ground...” said Serelipta.

“Good or bad, it isn’t easy to change preconceptions that have been drilled into him for decades, especially since his youth. There’s a fine line between education and brainwashing. It’s the same repetitive process.”

Gain stopped sipping his boba tea to say, “Hm... Correcting those preconceptions would have been far more difficult if he had been older. Perhaps it’s for the best that he’s become self-aware of it now.”

Wilieris sighed. “Maybe so.”

“What’s the matter?” Serelipta asked.

“I don’t make a fuss about things just for the sake of it. As infuriating as your smug expression is, I understand why you spoke to Ryoma, after the katana incident...and our world will become more active, thanks to the replenished

magical energy. Considering more monsters will appear in the future because of it, allowing him to use his strength will be to his benefit and to the benefit of those around him... That, I can accept.”

The other gods looked relieved, as the quarrel between Serelipta and Wilieris seemed settled. Quarrels weren’t uncommon among the gods, but a drawn-out conflict could cause some inconveniences, and it just wasn’t fun to watch.

With the mood in the area relaxed, Lulutia said, “If Ryoma becomes stronger and more stable, why don’t we give him those katanas?”

“As worrying as those blades are, they are still his father’s keepsake. He’s got more right to them than we do. As long as we’re confident he can handle it, we can hand them over to him,” Tekun said.

“That will be more in the future, but it’s worth considering,” Fernobeliasaid. “In fact, some troubling monsters are appearing in the Sea of Trees of Cyrus.”

“Whoa! They gotta be serious if you’re calling them ‘troubling.’”

“They’re confined to a very limited area, so they won’t damage the ecosystem. If the sea of trees takes care of them naturally, great. Otherwise, I’ll consider stepping in.”

“You’re in charge of that place, so we’ll leave that up to you. If that’s happening in the sea of trees, we better keep an eye out on other places.”

“Monsters have destroyed countries before,” Kufo muttered ominously.

Serelipta answered with his usual nonchalance. “I wouldn’t worry about that. Countries fall because their people are unprepared. Monster populations increase gradually, so as long as armies deal with them properly, any country will prevail, perhaps with some casualties.”

“Hmm... It’s not easy to see humans die because of it. Without replenishing magical energy, the entire world will collapse. Then, all lives would be lost. I’d like nothing more than to find a way to fix this...” Gain seemed to speak for every god there.

“To be honest, I can’t stand the situation we’re in. Never was okay with it, but I’ve felt worse since we learned about what the Earth gods did.”

“We feel the same way, Tekun. Speaking of, Fernobelias. You mentioned once that Ryoma’s research showed promise to improve our situation, didn’t you?”

“I spoke of improvement, not a solution. Something that would allow us to delay the next replenishment for a few decades or so—as everything stands now, of course. It’s possible more breakthroughs could be reached, which would change everything. That’s why I look forward to his results. The lack of magical energy in this world is a problem we have to bear. Even if Ryoma is fully willing to cooperate, we can’t rely on him too readily.”

“That’s true,” Lulutia agreed. “Ryoma has his own life... Wait a minute. Ryoma’s already heading to the Sea of Trees, right? Where those troublesome monsters were born in the first place.”

The gods shared a look.

Tekun managed to organize the information quicker than the rest. “Preparations are almost done. Just one more task: to raise his adventurer rank. Judging by how Ryoma’s doing, he plans to take on a bunch of monsters and monster-hunting missions to rack up his rank all at once. If all goes well, it’ll be maybe half a year until all the conditions are met.”

“Probably faster, knowing him,” Grimp said.

“Yes. He would cram in as many tasks as he could possibly handle,” Wilieris said.

Their assessment seemed entirely plausible to the other gods too.

“Very possible. Likely, I’d even say.”

“He’s gotten much better than before, but I suppose the habits of a corporate slave were hard to forget,” said Kufo.

“Still some time before the city is rebuilt, but I won’t be surprised if he starts another project during his downtime,” Serelipta said.

“He’s already looking into system reforms around the city.”

“He’s training in the use of physical energy and combat-centered magic. He’s gearing up for this, fast.”

“Definitely preparing for a hunt, then. He’s gathering intel through the various

guilds too.”

“At this rate, we’ll never get a break! We don’t dare look away from what fascinating things Ryoma’s going to cook up.”

“Frankly, we never know what he’ll do if we look away.”

“Of course we should keep a close eye on him, and why not? He renewed his resolve to go on another adventure after speaking to us,” Gain said.

The gods agreed, and centered their focus on Ryoma, who was busily working away. His new departure was moments away.

Afterword

Hello, this is the author, Roy. Thank you so much for picking up Vol. 12 of *By the Grace of the Gods*.

The attacks on Gimul have finally come to an end. Through collaboration with allies of all species, Ryoma protected the city and its people, although they didn't come out entirely unscathed. As the disturbances in Gimul culminated in a direct attack, Ryoma was able to learn something from it too.

Now that the turbulent New Year's has come and gone, how will Ryoma choose to live his life? His journey will carry on—at times bursting with energy and at other times rife with difficult decisions.

I can only hope that you've enjoyed my work so far and that you're looking forward to reading more of it.

Extra Story: The Noncombatant and the Secret Room

While the laundry shop Bamboo Forest was under attack, employees without combat experience were hiding out in the shelter that had been secretly built deep under the storefront. Though the four walls were built of thick stone, the room looked just like any respectable living room.

“Oh?”

“Maria? What’s the matter?”

“My slime is terrified...”

Carme, the assistant store manager, said gravely, “We have an uninvited guest, just as Ryoma said.”

Fina, who worked in the front end, nervously muttered, “I hope Lilyn and others will be okay...”

“They’ll be fine. They’re all super strong, and we can’t get in their way if we’re down here.”

“Jane’s right... I know, Fina. Why don’t we all make some dinner right now. I think it would be nice for them to have something to eat when they come back in. Carme, we can cook in here, can’t we?”

“That’s a wonderful idea, Sherma. Since Ryoma placed a magical item in here for ventilation, we should be fine as long there’s not too much smoke involved. I saw a small magical item for cooking, so let’s make use of it.”

Carme swiftly approached the shelf in the corner of the room and brought back a box full of cookware. “Here’s what we have to cook with. I’ll bring ingredients over too. What would you like to cook tonight?”

“It must be biting out there. Let’s make a nice, warm soup. Easy to eat, and we can make it more filling with potatoes, for example.”

So, all the noncombatants got to work on dinner.

“This seems strange, doesn’t it? Not that I have any doubt about them, but being able to cook under an attack,” said Jane.

“That’s true. There were times when we had to evacuate because of monster attacks, but those were always tense,” Fina said.

“Maybe because there’s the packing,” Sherma chimed in. “I don’t know how it was in the farms, but I’ve never been to a shop more securely guarded than this one. How about you?”

“A few establishments that mainly serve nobles. But certainly not a watch system with slimes, or even a bunker like this. At most, you might find similar tools and facilities ready for evacuation.”

“Right? It can’t be normal that we have this room far underground, guarded by a giant stone slime disguised as a wall.”

“I’ve come accustomed to things like this, but it is incredible when you stop to think about it. If I hadn’t been shown the place and given the password to get in, I never would have known about this place.”

“Even the security guards only saw it as a normal wall.”

“It’s pretty much like we’re stuck in the wall, anyway... Oh!” Maria raised her voice as she noticed something. “Sounds like it’s gotten quiet up there. My slime isn’t scared anymore, so everyone should be okay.”

“Really? Thank goodness!”

“Will they be coming in soon? Our soup won’t be done in time.”

“We do have some instant food we can eat right away, so there’s no rush. Since the security team seems to be faring well, why don’t we go over what we’ll do moving forward?”

The employees went on to discuss how their business would operate the next day, and how they could help the city beyond the scope of the shop. Each of them was determined to do what they could, even without the capacity for fighting...

Bonus Short Stories

Raising Children

At last, the city had begun to settle down again. One day, two children came bounding into a house in the slums, happily calling out, “Give us another job, Lible!”

“Beck, Wist—what about the water delivery I set you up with this morning?”

“Um, we finished today’s. This is from the shelter,” said Wist.

“Got it. You boys knocked it right out of the park. Thought I gave you a bit too much for a couple of kids,” Lible said.

“We’re not little kids anymore,” Beck countered. “Everyone’s hitting a growth spurt or something. We’re stronger now, and we can work longer.”

“Especially since we can use decent tools... Even if we’re delivering the same amount, it’s much easier to do it with a working wagon,” Wist chimed in.

“Our environment has gotten much better,” Lible admitted. “That must make a big difference, especially for youngsters like you. You’re both still kids, if you ask me—but you’re starting to grow up, I’ll give you that.” Coming from one of the parental figures of the slums, this comment made Wist smile in earnest joy, while Beck pretended to pout out of shyness. “At this rate, it won’t be too long until you leave this place.”

This time, a flicker of grimness crossed the boys’ faces.

“What’s the matter?”

“I mean, that’s pretty sudden, you know?” Beck turned to Wist for confirmation.

“Y-Yeah. We talked about when we’d start work as adventurers, but it never seemed...real.”

“I don’t mean today, and I’m not trying to rush you. Just something for you to

start thinking about,” Lible said.

“Sure, I get what you’re saying,” said Beck. “But that’s not for a while, right?”

Wist chimed in again. “We can barely make enough to feed ourselves, and we haven’t even paid you back for—”

“Idiots!” Lible shouted, silencing the children at once. “You two survived in these slums—and this has never been an easy neighborhood to live in—because you were greedy and had thick skin. Listen to me. You are young. You have a future. If you have a shot at living a normal life outside of this part of town, that’s going to be better for you than anything in this dump. Don’t make excuses about the future, about paying anyone back. If you ever get an opportunity to get out of here, you take it and run!”

“O-Okay... I will,” said Beck.

“I’m sorry,” Wist said.

“Hmph... There’s no getting rid of poverty. As much as this place has shrunk, it won’t ever go away entirely. If you think your lives through and *then* decide to stay, I won’t turn you away. Whenever you want to come back, my door is open. And I know how hard both of you have been working. Keep up that hard work.”

“G-Got it!”

“We will!”

“Go to the north-northeast shelter. Jeff’s been delivering firewood. Tell him I sent you, and he’ll give you a job,” Lible said.

“All right! Let’s go, Wist!”

“Yeah! Thank you, Lible!”

Lible huffed again as the boys ran out. Once they were gone, he took out a cigarette and lit it, the slightest hint of a grin threatening to break his perpetually stoic expression.

Hudom’s New Routine

“Hudom, you’re heading out now?” asked an employee of Bamboo Forest.

“A bit early. I’m wanted at the security headquarters,” I replied.

“You certainly have a lot on your plate. Have a good one.”

“You too.”

After I left the laundry shop, I walked along the city streets, still bright with daylight. Despite the lingering scars from the attacks, the streets were more vibrant, passersby more lively. Renovations were smooth going in all districts, and the involvement of migrant workers in the city’s renovation efforts seemed to have lessened their stigma among native residents.

“If it isn’t Hudom!”

“What are you doing here this early? Playing hooky today?”

“No, I’m not! I’m going to the security headquarters,” I said.

“You got work over there, then? Keep it up!”

“Come grab a drink sometime. You help us out so often—I owe you a few on the house.”

“Thanks. I’ll take you up on that soon.” It hit me that people recognized and greeted me more frequently on the streets, now that I’d been helping Ryoma with his tasks around the city.

Back when I’d wandered from city to city, I had never built relationships like this. Not so much as an acquaintance. That had worked out better for me at the time, and it wasn’t like I’d missed social interactions... “But this isn’t too bad, either.”

I enjoyed this routine enough that I found myself smiling for no reason. Spending the day working at the laundry shop, unless I was called in to take care of something else as need arose... I was busy, but I wasn’t worried about my next meal or a roof over my head. And I still had plenty of time and willing partners to train with. Ryoma, of course, but also the security guards at Bamboo Forest—Fay and Ox in particular. Even in my traveling days, I’d rarely come across a fighter as skilled as either of them. Even though I’d been somewhat coerced into this setup, I couldn’t have wished for a better one to

further my craft. Besides, helping out Ryoma was kind of fun.

It did concern me that the attack on Gimul would be a topic of gossip among nobles, which meant intel on Ryoma and some of his slimes would get out. Not that I had the moral high ground after my brief career as a spy, but nobles with nefarious intentions were sure to set their sights on them.

“Once he sets his mind to it, he doesn’t know when to stop,” I muttered to myself. Ryoma’s whole lifestyle—particularly his slimes—were top-secret stuff, but he never seemed too careful about keeping secrets. Of course, more often than not, he used his abilities to help others, and he could take on almost any assailant a noble might send his way...

He kept me on my toes, that was for sure. The work was fulfilling and anything but boring. Maybe this was the perfect opportunity for me to plant my roots.

“I know. Maybe it’s high time I wrote a letter.” I had been sending my father regular mail, but only professionally, as a middleman between me and His Majesty. It had been a long time since I’d spoken to my mother or brothers back home. After I’d practically run away, I had never been too eager to return. But now that I worked as Ryoma’s assistant—under the duke’s employment, technically—I could actually read their responses if they wrote back. “I should at least tell them that I’ve started this new life, and...that I’m having fun. That’ll do for now.”

As long as they were willing, we’d have plenty of time to write to each other.

With thoughts of my future in mind, I kept walking under the clear blue sky. I had a good feeling about today.

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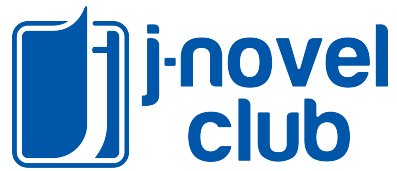
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By the Grace of the Gods: Volume 12

by Roy

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